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Zenka Mermaid

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Suou Zenka became a mermaid in her first year of high school, or so I've heard. According to her, she "wasn't a mermaid, but a half-fish person"—but for now, let's just say she was a mermaid. For someone like her who gave off such a dignified atmosphere, it certainly felt more appropriate to call her as such over something that sounded like it could come from the Cthulhu Mythos.

Apparently, a truck had made a sharp turn onto a pedestrian-only street in order to avoid a child who hadn't waited for the signal to cross, and she was met with the misfortune of being hit by that truck and falling into an irrigation canal on the verge of death. She only managed to escape death by eating the miraculous "mermaid flesh".

Between her, who had become immortal by eating, and me, who had become immortal by being eaten, we made for a pretty good contrast. But in terms of the inconvenient lives we would lead afterwards, we were exactly the same.

We would never gain back any compensation for that.

There were times where what you gain is what you lose, and there were times where you lose what you gain, but there would never be a time where you can gain back what you lose.

And that was even more true when it came to life and immortality.

Despite having been a promising swimming athlete, she was no longer able to swim after that happened—and it wasn't because of any injuries lingering after the accident. After all, the "mermaid flesh" allowed her to completely recover from any injuries without leaving a single scar.

And it wasn't due to any psychological trauma from falling into the irrigation canal.

What was more traumatic was—after the accident.

Whether you called it a punishment for consuming the miraculous "mermaid flesh" or just an extreme case of food poisoning—after recovery, whenever she entered the water, her body would transform into that of a mermaid. And you may think that a "mermaid transformation" sounds rather romantic, but I urge you to listen until the end.

In short, it was like the *retrogression* of evolution.

Just spilling some juice on her skin would turn it into scales, just washing her hands would turn them into cod, and taking a bath would mean the loss of her legs—and she couldn't even go out on rainy days, for fear of being unable to breathe and suffocating on the

side of the road.

Dying was better than this.

Apparently, she'd thought as such a countless number of times—just as I had.

But after coming to terms with it (which I'd heard had taken quite some time), and then ten years after that, it seems that her approach to her constitution had turned to, "This was better than dying."

"'It would've been better if the truck had run over the child instead', and such thoughts, I've finally managed to leave behind—and eventually, I'd like to become someone who's able to think, 'I'm happy I'm alive.'"

…In the first place, you may think that it took quite some time to get a twenty-six-year-old woman like her to open up about a topic so private and sensitive, but in actuality, she had told me all of the above on our very first meeting.

Of course, while it wasn't simply as a return gift, I told her about the spring break between my second and third years of high school, about how I'd had my blood sucked by as well as sucked the blood of a vampire, about how I had become—or had been reduced into being—a vampire.

The place that I, twenty-three-year-old Araragi Koyomi, had come to work at was that open of a workplace. And its name was the Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad.

"Araragi-kun, why'd you decide to become a police officer?"

As a high schooler, due to having ridden around everywhere on my bicycle, I had believed that my area of activities had been rather expansive, and I had been under the impression that there were no unknown places or secret roads that I wasn't aware of in the compact little town I lived in. But coming home after four years made me realize that this was just an arrogant misunderstanding of mine.

For example, I hadn't known that the high school that I had attended back then, Naoetsu High, had had such a large river flowing right in front of it.

A large river, or perhaps a daring river.

The river had the kind of intensity that you could go rafting in—even if you weren't someone with a transformative condition like Suou-san, I doubt you would want to casually dip your feet in a current like this.

"Oops. Please excuse me. Assistant Inspector Araragi, for what reason did you decide to become a police officer?" said Suou-san, correcting herself in a playful manner.

Assistant Inspector Araragi.

I felt like I was unable to respond to that title—which I was sure I would never get used to—and like I was unable to respond to that uncomfortable question.

Thinking about how many times I would be asked that question again and again—goodness gracious, I was already feeling tired even though it was only the first time. Although it was a little weird. Despite having gone into minute detail about the vampire that lived in my shadow, I hadn't said anything about why I chose to work at this job.

"Because my parents were police officers—I suppose. Both of them were."

"I see, I see. Does that mean that you felt like you wouldn't be able to become more than your parents if you didn't become a police officer? Or does it mean that you got to this position using the connections of your parents?"

She was using a teasing tone of voice, and in fact she probably was just straight up teasing me. But as I was the subject of the topic, I couldn't help but think about what she was asking.

I didn't think I had any of the admirable feelings of the former, but I didn't think I had any of the selfish feelings of the latter, either.

It wasn't like I did this out of some strong ambition, but it wasn't like this was calculated, either… That was just the kind of

person I was.

"A long time ago, I met this con man that really pissed me off. I was pretty badly deceived by him, actually. So my dream is to arrest him. It's my heart's desire. So that's why I'm a police officer."

After some hesitation, I finally responded with that.

This, at least, wasn't a lie.

Although you could say it was only just "not a lie".

"Hmm. A con man, huh? So you want to go after white-collar crime—you sound like such a career man. Then, since you were assigned to something like the Rumors Squad, does it feel like it's not really meeting your expectations, Araragi-kun? Well, it's just four more months of enduring this, so let's do our best!"

"I've never thought poorly of this squad. Although I do admit that it was unexpected. That a public institution had a squad like this."

"Right, well, this is just a test run, after all. It's just one of Gaen-san's many plans—whether or not it's up to Assistant Inspector Araragi's expectations."

"Like I said, I don't think that."

"I'm counting on you for a lot, though. Seriously, even if you're just a career man here for training, we've finally gotten a male coworker in this squad."

It was hard to tell how serious she actually was. But Suou-san, who didn't mix well with water, was at least twice the distance from the river as I was, showing that she didn't want to be hit by a single drop of the water spray. Despite her usual cool demeanor, it was clear she was taking considerable precaution when it came to riverbanks.

At the very least, for this matter in particular, it wasn't a mistake to rely on a newcomer like me for help… The Rumors Squad chief sure had a nasty personality for dispatching someone who wasn't good with water to the waterfront.

Though they were a trusted friend of Gaen-san.

"I guess it's more likely for girls to be into romantic stuff like the occult and the spiritual, since the squad ended up being a bunch of girls. Being biased isn't a good thing, you know. So don't hold back, Araragi-kun, and enjoy this harem situation to your heart's content."

"Please. I've left all that behind in my high school days."

"Um. What kind of life did you lead in high school?"

She snickered, and then continued.

"I don't know Gaen-san personally, but I do owe her a lot. So I'd like to produce results that can meet up to that—and your life may have been smooth sailing up until now, Assistant Inspector Araragi, and you may not want to do so, but while you're with us, try to cooperate, okay? Think of it as a form of community service."

Community service, huh. Though I wasn't the type to have any sort of affection for my community.

Besides, I couldn't call my life smooth sailing.

Not in the slightest.

For an uncomfortable-sounding title like Assistant Inspector, any idiot could pass the civil service exam and start as one. For that much, you didn't even need connections from your parents.

And it wasn't like I'd been living apart from oddity phenomena for the past four years—even if I was apart from my hometown, my shadow stayed perfectly attached to me, and that shadow was one that pulled an oddity along with it.

Something that I had always done had simply become a job. And it wasn't even a hobby that had turned into a job, but my lifestyle.

The Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad?

That was just Gaen-san setting up something like this in the town I lived in.

Since that woman knew everything, I couldn't help but suspect that she decided to use the Naoetsu Police Department as a model, already having foreseen that I would become a police officer in the future.

Okay.

So it was like having your oddities locally sourced.

As a 23-year-old adult, I'll do my best and work myself to the bone.

If anything, working myself to the bone was one of my strong points. In the literal sense.

"Anyway, Suou-san. What kind of rumor was it again? What sort of circumstances does this river have? I ended up being paired with you without getting all the details… and the chief just told me to ask you."

"You can be more casual with me, you know? I'm not that much older than you, plus your rank is higher. You're an assistant inspector, and I'm an officer."

"I'm not very good at being casual. I had a good upbringing."

"Don't make me laugh."

She shrugged.

"Well, this river was a place you could swim in—and in the summer, families would have barbecues, and kids would use it as some kind of playground, and so on," Suou-san continued. "But I guess since this is your hometown, there's no need to explain that much, right?"

"No, I'd like you to explain that much as well."

In the first place, I hadn't even known that this river existed

until recently.

Unfortunately, as I had had a good upbringing, I spent my childhood without a family to take me to barbecues or friends to play with.

I had wondered where everyone in my class would go off to after leaving me behind, but I see now! They would go to places like this.

Although it's not something I could do anything about, knowing that as an adult.

"There weren't any major problems that occurred until now, but this summer, there were a series of accidents—five children that drowned here."

"……"

"At least, five that we know of. There could be more. Nobody has died yet, from what we know."

But—being biased wasn't a good thing.

Hearing those words, I turned to look at the river again—the boisterously flowing river wasn't necessarily on the level of rapids, but I probably couldn't guarantee absolute safety in it.

While Suou-san had called it "some kind of playground", looking at it now, it looked absolutely too dangerous for kids to play in.

I wonder.

Could this just be the "viewpoint of an adult"?

Had I just become a boring adult, being overbearing and restricting kids from their fun?

"Whether that's being overbearing or not, we've been starting to hear things along those lines—like, people asking if we should bar entry from the riverbank or have schools warn children not to come close."

"Like how playground equipment has been gradually disappearing from parks?"

"I'm not completely against that happening, though. It's a risk to keep equipment that's slowly deteriorating, and wanting to keep it is just for the nostalgia of older people."

It was an opinion that was more mature than I'd expect from a twenty-six-year-old.

It could be due to the mermaid flesh she ate—ten years in her life could very well be the same as eight hundred years normally.

"Although it's more that older people rarely change their opinions. It's like how cars made when traffic laws were more lenient didn't have any seatbelts. And you could still go on highways."

I didn't really get that comparison.

She was probably enjoying the generation gap with how her

metaphors didn't make sense to her junior.

"Well, regardless of general opinion. In the case of this river, if someone had died, there would absolutely have been restrictions imposed on it—so it's a good thing that the season ended before that could happen."

"Did they just set aside the problem for now?"

"I suppose it would be more like deferring it. Even though no deaths have occurred, five is still a considerable number. It weighs pretty heavily on me. And one is still in critical condition, not having regained consciousness yet—and even among the other four, we've had broken bones and the like, so the situation is tense."

Although they could recover if they ate my flesh—she said, without missing a beat.

If that was the case, then even the unconscious child would make a complete recovery if I had them drink my blood—but that couldn't happen.

I couldn't allow it to happen.

Both Suou-san and I knew very well what kind of tragedy would be born from such a rash action.

Neither of us wanted to make anyone else go through these terrible conditions that were worse than dying.

"Anyway, it's Town Hall's job to decide whether or not to put a fence around the riverbank, not ours—our job is to manage the rumors, after all."

To manage the rumors.

The phrase didn't exactly roll off the tongue, but that was indeed the role of the Rumors Squad.

And it was indeed my job.

Urban legends. Idle rumors. Street gossip.

And—rumors.

"Out of the five children that drowned, we have testimony from three of them. According to them, they didn't just drown—their ankles were grabbed by some 'invisible hand' and pulled to the bottom of the water."

"……"

Three out of five.

Excluding the child that was still unconscious, it was really three out of four.

Just going by the numbers made the credibility of this testimony extremely high.

In other words, an extremely credible rumor.

"…I wonder if there's a kappa in this river."

"Who knows? Maybe it's a mermaid," said Suou-san in response to my attempt at poking fun at the situation.

Her expression was stony, making me wonder if it was even a joke.

The atmosphere felt rather hard-boiled.

"At the very least, it doesn't seem like any of the children had their *shirikodama* removed. But there's no mistake that the number of drowning accidents has suddenly increased—making this the perfect breeding grounds for a ghost story."

So we need to smash it up before that happens—said Suou-san disinterestedly, with a dry voice that belied her violent statement.

The words of a mermaid who had to stay dry to survive.

"…Suou-san. Why did you decide to become a police officer?" I asked. Not simply to make conversation or as revenge for earlier, but because I had suddenly become curious.

Like me, she suffered from the aftereffects of an oddity story, with many physical restrictions applied to her, but that didn't mean she had to become a police officer—and she could very well have gone on avoiding waterfronts if she hadn't become one.

"Araragi-kun, do you like pro baseball? I really like it, you see."

"Eh?"

"I like it so much I even watch minor league games."

"You like it that much…"

As I responded as such, and as I marveled at this unexpected hobby of hers, I thought she was just cleverly trying to change the topic, but I was wrong.

Suou-san continued.

"But it really hurts to watch player drafts. Even though there are these players that are so good, almost monsters, at baseball, they don't even get to choose the team they play for—so I always think about what it means to be able to choose your occupation."

Hmm.

Strictly speaking, some players did have the right to veto, but I knew that what she was getting at probably wasn't as simple as that—even I, when I became a police officer, had tried to explore other avenues at one point, before having to face reality in the end.

Reality. The grim reality.

It created a wall tougher than having to face oddities.

"People will only become what they're able to become. Whether that's police officers, or mermaids."

Or vampires, said Suou-san, looking at my shadow.

Strictly speaking, I was someone who wasn't even able to become a vampire.

In normal mode, I wasn't immortal in the way Suou-san was. I was neither human nor oddity, just something half-baked.

But if I told her that, I'm sure she'd respond with something self-deprecating like, "Well, I'm just a half-baked half-fish person," so I kept my mouth shut.

It wasn't like anything would come from the two of us sitting around half-baked and staring at the river forever.

Because it was the off-season, it was only me and Suou-san at the riverbank, but it was better to finish our investigation before anybody noticed. And as Suou-san couldn't enter the water, it was up to me to carry out the survey of the site.

Using the shadow of a tree as cover, I changed into a swimsuit.

To think that my first job as a police officer would be to go swimming—not to mention that flowing water was supposed to be bad for vampires, although it was something I could endure.

The whole job was about endurance.

"Wow. You really work out, don't you, Araragi-kun. No wonder you're so eager to strip."

"I don't work out. It's just my constitution."

And I wasn't eager to do anything.

"Mhm. Can I take a picture?"

"Of course not," I said as I took a step into the river. If a pro of it being the off-season was that there was nobody around, then a con would be how freezing cold the water was, which I came to be keenly aware of.

It was basically an ablution.

It would be a huge letdown to hear that a vampire who was brought in as an assistant inspector for training died of a heart attack—and even though it would be a great pleasure to besmirch Gaen-san's name, I didn't exactly want to die to accomplish that.

As I had learned in my swimming lessons in the past, I splashed handfuls of water onto my body as I stepped deeper into the water.

Uh-oh, it was really deep.

For someone like myself who wasn't exactly a giant (I hadn't grown any taller in college), this was quite a cruel task.

As such, I decided to give up early on and put on my goggles, allowing myself to sink beneath the water without putting up much resistance. Somehow, it felt like I was making up for all that time I

didn't spend playing when I was a kid.

By myself.

"Are you all right, Araragi-kun? If you absolutely need it, should I come help?"

…Although, it seemed that, from Suou-san's point of view, I looked like some guy who was nearly drowning.

I gave her a thumbs-up (though it probably seemed more like my arms were flailing up) in order to make it seem like I was having absolutely no problem. Disregarding the fact that my swimming had the elegance of a rock, I managed to make it to the centerline of the river and daringly dive to the bottom without any problems.

Because I had gotten used to how cold the water was, and because I could see fairly well due to the relative clearness of the water, I could even say I felt some entertainment value in having this spot as somewhere to hide, even if the flow of the water wasn't necessarily calm.

It was the random thrills that you could only get from natural phenomena.

Maybe it was like one of those endless pools. Or was that backwards? Was it endless pools that were based on rivers?

Naturally, because I could be thrown off by the strength of the water if I let my guard down, and because I could slip on the mossy rocks at any minute, there was a world of difference between this and an endless pool…

But even as an amateur, I felt that having as many as five drowning accidents occur in this river felt like it was a little too much. If you told me that there was some other factor, it would be hard to deny—but, unlike my high school days, I couldn't simply go with an amateur opinion.

Since I was no longer an amateur.

Unlike Oshino or Ononoki-chan, I was now a professional police officer and had to lay down a proper judgment—as a member of the Rumors Squad, even if it was only for a four-month training period.

…Ononoki-chan, huh?

Thinking about that girl made me nostalgic.

And from there, I figured out one thing I wanted to confirm.

"Suou-san. You said they were children, but around what age were they specifically? If they were elementary school kids, I feel like it would have been hard for their feet to touch the ground, even in the shallow parts…"

"The oldest was fifteen years old, and the youngest was seven. Without being biased, I can say it does feel like the range is pretty wide. Incidentally, I believe the oldest one was taller than you,

Araragi-kun. He said his feet touched the ground at the very deepest part."

"Is that so?"

Then I couldn't say anything about that.

It wasn't something I could use.

I went to a point where my feet could touch the ground and said, "If we turn that around, it means that no one over sixteen was a victim," putting the obvious into words.

It was hard to judge if I should interpret it as adults being less likely to drown when playing in the water, or if I should interpret it as the trend of younger people being more likely to encounter oddities.

It turned out that meeting a vampire when I was almost a high school third-year was on the rare side of things—even Suou-san was only 15 or so when she ate the "mermaid flesh".

The results of the inspection turned out to be "we couldn't say either way", but really, the only one who would be satisfied with such neutralism would be Oshino Meme.

In this case, a neutral conclusion was no different from substantiating the rumor.

Our job was to "smash it up" before the rumor became an oddity story, so going "we couldn't say either way" basically meant we weren't doing our job.

That would just be stealing my salary. Even though I was a police officer.

"I suppose we don't have a choice. I'm going to call Shinobu," I said as I pulled myself out of the water.

"Eh? Already? Aren't you being a little hasty?" asked Suou-san, astonished. "I thought you'd try a little harder on your own," she said as she passed me a towel (extending her arm as far as possible so she herself wouldn't get wet).

Did I disappoint her? Although I had no intention of trying to show off.

"Trying to do everything on my own by any means possible and making a mess out of things was what I did in my teens, after all. I've learned a little since then."

"I see. But hold off on calling that vampire for a bit. Don't bring her out when I'm here. I don't want to be eaten."

Ah, that's right.

I'd been very firmly warned about that by the chief.

Because Suou-san was a mermaid, that in other words meant that her body was "mermaid flesh" in itself—and even before all that miraculousness about how it could completely cure an unconscious patient, that flesh was a delicacy.

Like me, Shinobu could no longer be called a vampire, but

even if she didn't drink blood, her nature as a consumer of oddities still remained—and while that nature made her an excellent way of getting an "expert's opinion" on whether or not there were any oddities in this river, having such delicious meat right next to her would surely throw off that judgment.

For the chief and Suou-san, who hadn't spent over five years together with her, it was natural to be wary that Shinobu would indiscriminately make a beeline for the "mermaid flesh" that was my senpai.

That wasn't something you could compromise on.

Compared to the fundamentally harmless image of the mermaid, both Shinobu and I were such beings that it was almost bizarre that we were still allowed to live.

"Well, I'm gonna dash off back to the office ahead of you, then. If you figure something out, just text me, okay?"

"Is texting okay? What about keeping things confidential?"

"It's our role to get rid of things that should be kept confidential, isn't it? If you want, feel free to just livestream the whole thing. You've managed to become so muscular, Araragi-kun, so it would be a waste if you didn't show it off."

I couldn't care less about my muscles, but in any case, Suou-san soon departed from the riverbank—just to make sure, I gave her about five minutes to get some distance before crouching and knocking on my shadow.

As one would expect, a vampire who led a certain lifestyle for almost six centuries wouldn't be able to so easily change it in just a few years. But even though Shinobu remained nocturnal to this day, she would still respond when called on, as long as she wasn't in a bad mood.

It seemed that on this day, she was actually in an extremely good mood, as it only took one knock before that blonde young girl came out of my shadow with a "nyuu~" sound. And as I, the master, was clad in beachwear (or since I wore it to swim in a river, should I call it riverwear?), Shinobu was also wearing a swimsuit.

It was a one-piece bathing suit that almost made it seem like she just came to play in the river.

"Ka ka!" laughed Shinobu, baring her fangs. "'Mermaid flesh', is it? Certainly, not even I have had the pleasure of eating such a thing. I wonder what flavor it could possibly have?"

"Give me a break. Please don't eat my colleague."

"I shan't, I shan't. I have no intention of laying waste to my master's place of work—not when it directly concerns my own lifestyle. In turn, please work as hard as you can to support me."

"I didn't think I was working to support you, though…"

That wasn't the case, was it?

Or rather, perhaps that was exactly the case.

Me being alive meant that Shinobu stayed alive as well, and it was because Shinobu was alive that I was able to keep on living—"If you want to die tomorrow, I'm ready for my life to end tomorrow."

That immature line that I had spouted off as a high schooler still remained valid even now.

That was Araragi Koyomi's top-priority stipulation.

"Nevertheless, I'm going to need you to work a little, too. What do you think, Shinobu? I'd be fine with kappa or mermaids, or even that dear old *omoshi-kani*, if you'd like."

"Dear old, you say? Well, I suppose it has been a while since we have been in this town in itself—it seems that that Mayoi girl has been doing a good job of keeping things suppressed. I have to say, it feels exceedingly stable from a spiritual standpoint, to the point of irritating me. Or at least making me hungry."

"Is that so? Hmm… Then, does that mean the five drowning accidents that occurred here were really just accidents?"

"Nay. That is not the case," said Shinobu, shaking her head.

It was a motion that was extremely theatrical for no reason.

Or was there a reason?

"From my diagnosis, out of the five cases, four of them were not accidents, but incidents. And if we leave it alone, it is sure to create even more victims."

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As it was only for four months, I had decided to live at my parents' house during the training period.

For the first time in a while, I was back in this house.

However, the Araragi household that I had spent my teenage years in presently housed only a single individual: the eldest daughter, Araragi Karen.

It was unlikely that they had been waiting for the exact moment when all three of their kids had graduated. But when the second daughter, Tsukihi, entered college, my parents, who were at the head of the prefectural police, were called in to work for the national government.

Since the two of them were still together, it wasn't necessarily the same as one of them being away from their family for work. But anyway, seeing as I had already left the house in the spring of my second year in university, it was only my sisters that remained, but suddenly, a month after my parents' departure, Tsukihi quickly dropped out of college in order to re-apply to a college overseas.

Seriously?

Well, she was always the kind of sister that felt like she couldn't be confined to the boundaries of Japan, so in a sense it was the perfect route for her. But as a result, it left Karen in the sorry state of being in the house all by herself, which really made me feel rather sorry for her.

Although, that made it sound like I should be visiting my home more often.

As such, I decided to treat Karen more nicely, at least for the next four months.

However, those warm feelings were brought to a halt as soon as I went through the entrance to my dear old home—for a house that was way too large for only one person to live in, Karen sure had made a huge mess.

It took three days to clean it up.

"It's not my faaault, y'knooow. Unlike you, nii-chan, I've been working since last year!"

As her brother, I decided to hear out the excuse that she fired off.

In the first place, as I had left the house first, I had no right to complain, and Karen was technically my senpai in terms of employment—she had started working as soon as she graduated high school.

At the Naoetsu Police Department as well.

I never thought that she'd take that intense martial arts training and use it to make arrests… But Araragi Karen, former member of the Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School Fire Sisters in charge of combat, was now employed as a police officer in charge of public safety.

It really was the right person for the right job, but I never thought that I'd be beaten to the punch by my own sister.

Whether or not we were "chips off the old block", the eldest son and daughter following in the footsteps of their parents to become police officers made Tsukihi's freewheeling stand out even more. On the other hand, perhaps she had finally acquired a sense of independence at the age of twenty after having been so easily influenced by her brother and sister for so long.

"Eat up!"

"Thanks for the meal."

Though her ability to keep things neat and tidy was utterly hopeless, at the very least, Karen had succeeded in acquiring some cooking skills when she was on her own.

That made it even harder to keep my head up.

It was pretty natural after being away for four years, but it really did feel like I was just a guest at my own home.

"So, how was it, nii-chan? Assistant Inspector Nii-chan."

"Don't call me that. And make fun of me. I'm a career man, now."

"But weirdly enough, you don't really have a good image. Is it because of TV dramas?"

To be honest, I had been thinking the same.

After studying so desperately, and twice as hard during college entrance exams, and then finally passing the public service exam, only to end up with a bad image…

I'd been told by my college classmates that I just seemed like a bundle of lust for power and career advancement.

As long as I wasn't with someone I could feel at ease with, I probably shouldn't describe myself as a career man.

I was already feeling anxious about being teased by the on-site officers after my induction… Why did I have to feel like this even after I'd become a working adult? I was glad that nothing like that happened at the Rumors Squad, although I did still get the elite treatment, in some manner of speaking.

The people of the Rumors Squad had all come into contact with oddities in some form or another and were housing oddities in their bodies, but it seemed that I was the only one who had actually spoken to an oddity and come to a mutual understanding.

Elite treatment, huh?

For someone who was basically at the bottom of the barrel in high school, I couldn't exactly say I felt happy to say those words.

"Hahaha! That's hilarious! So it's like that? When guys who are all about anti-authority are suddenly thrown into positions of authority?"

said my sister, coming up with a cheeky example even as she took in twice the calories that I did. Considering she was basically twice my size (though that was exaggerating, she was only about twenty centimeters taller than me), her high metabolism, and her activities as a popular public safety officer, I was sure the calories she needed was an order of magnitude higher than what I needed (and that was surely not an exaggeration).

On-site officers, huh?

Hmm.

The kind of work I had wanted to do was something along those lines… But after seeing my sister's sociability firsthand, I felt like I was personally experiencing Suou-san's words of "people will only become what they're able to become".

I couldn't become my sister, and my sister couldn't become me.

"Well, people like you who work impulsively and emotionally aren't really suited to working on-site, y'know? What'd suit you better would be like, leaning back and crossing your legs and being self-important in front of a mahogany desk."

"I don't think anything could make me more mad than hearing that from my own sister. If I'm so impulsive and emotional, I guess you're just asking for me to beat you up!"

"Ooh! Do you want to fight it out, then? I even have a toothbrush ready to go if we need one!"

"Stop it! That was a rash decision made out of my youthful passions!"

And I made the small claim that I had actually been on-site today.

It was an elite claim to make.

"At least, it seems like the Rumors Squad is going to actually make use of me, instead of just having me sit around and do nothing. I actually was brought on-site, instead of just being treated like a bad rash."

"Oho? Well, that entire squad is basically like a bad rash, y'know. In that no one wants to touch it. Since it's sponsored by the higher-ups, there's just a whole buncha rumors flying around the whole precinct."

And so it was the Rumors Squad.

That's exactly what Gaen-san wanted.

"If you came to the Public Safety Squad, then I would've spent

all my time doting on you as your senpai, though."

"If I had to go through something so painful, I'd probably just look for another job," I said with a shrug of my shoulders.

I didn't want her to take revenge against my youthful passions in such a way… Although, on one hand, I honestly did think that it might have been better if it went the way she'd described. But I'd keep that a secret. I had had the selfish idea of working, not through the connections of my powerful parents but through those of my skillful sister, and getting through my training period easily and safely, even if I did have to deal with Karen.

But it was good that that didn't happen, since it was truly a very selfish desire.

"By the way, Karen-chan. You said there were a whole buncha rumors, but what exactly do you know about the Rumors Squad?"

I asked, keenly aware that I was still adding "chan" to her name despite her being over 180 centimeters and over 20 years old.

Even though I tried to stop, I never could in the end.

"Mm. Going to investigate any disturbing rumors that are appearing in the area, and stuff like that is what I've heard. Or taking care of things before an incident occurs… Since there have been cases where a disaster happened and people regret ignoring the warning signs. So in order to protect against that, the Rumors Squad was established… So instead of resolving incidents, it's about preempting them. But there are a lot of coworkers who think it's the opposite. That the Rumors Squad is there to prove that rumors are just rumors, and that incidents aren't going to happen."

"I see."

I expected that rumors of oddities or youkai wouldn't be circulating around the squad, but it was interesting to hear that it wasn't some kind of secret agency, and that the rumors were pretty close to the truth.

They were almost asymptotic.

Maybe the experiment also involved gradually being more transparent about things?

Gaen-san had said something along those lines back when I was approaching my training period—and while at the time I had wondered how honest she was being, I can see now that, for this particular case, she really was being honest.

"It's about time for the specialists who have hidden themselves from the public eye to switch over to forming an official organization, Koyomin—just like how the *onmyouji* were in the past. So I suppose in a sense, we'd just be going back to the starting point."

Like Suou-san had mentioned, this wasn't something that had just started now, but something she had planned far in advance—long

before she even met me.

And it was very much like her to come up with this approach to forming the organization into something like the National Police Agency—instead of trying to persuade higher-ups, she would become "friends" with those involved with oddities and send them into the organization lower in the hierarchy.

When the people that were sent in gained a good reputation, the plan would begin in full force—so the fact that I had been employed at this time was certainly not a coincidence.

Pinning down the regional jurisdictions instead of the central headquarters was a lot like the clever strategy in Othello of taking the corners first.

It's like I was dancing in the palm of her hand, no matter how far I went.

Well, if the implication was that Gaen-san had treated me well during my third year in high school as an investment towards this very moment, then I suppose I, like Suou-san, owed that much to her.

At the very least, I was going to serve out these next four months splendidly.

I'd do the best that I could.

Of course, I also felt that I wanted to show off my cool side to make up for all the pitiful sides I showed when I was in high school.

"And? Nii-chan, what did you mean by on-site? In the first place, what kind of work does the Rumors Squad actually do?"

"That's classified for the sake of the investigation—or I guess it's not.'"

If there was an element of danger, then I would definitely protect what was classified, even if the person I was speaking to was a police officer or my sister. But right now, the matter I was in charge of was proving that there was no danger.

And as a member of a squad trying to be transparent, I figured there wouldn't be a problem to talk about it.

But you could also say that this was also an important form of police questioning—it wasn't a good thing to bring your workplace into your home, but I figured Karen, who, unlike me, loved to go outdoors as a teen, would have played at that river before.

So I was going to ask her what it was like then.

"Karen-chan. Did you know that there was a huge river near Naoetsu High?"

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know."

"That's really nostalgic!"

It was a line I'd heard a lot back in the day.

Speaking of which, Karen-chan had been pretty close with Hanekawa, hadn't she?

“Although I haven’t heard from her recently. But that’s understandable. Are you still in contact with her, nii-chan?”

“Mm, ah, well, sometimes. Recently… Well, I guess it’s understandable…”

If we started talking about Hanekawa now, I was sure we’d never stop, so despite already being immersed in nostalgia, I forcefully turned the conversation back by asking, “So, did you know, or did you not know?”

“I knew about it, yeah. Or rather, the other day I went overnight fishing with everyone from the squad there.”

“……”

Forget loving the outdoors as a teen. She loved the outdoors even now.

She sure is active.

Even though she didn’t walk around outside with it on anymore, she still wore a tracksuit inside the house.

And she was still as sociable as she was as a student—it almost made me envy her.

And you could fish in that river? Huh.

Well, it’s true that when I dove underwater earlier today, I saw some pretty big fish in there.

“It seems that there’s been some kind of serial drowning accidents there. Children have been drowning there one after another, and a weird rumor is going around. So my main job is looking into that.”

“Hmm. Drowning accidents? That’s something I didn’t know about. And I camped out there without knowing about it. Should I not have done that?”

“No, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that.”

If you thought it was imprudent to go fishing at a place where kids had drowned, then pretty soon you’d start questioning your every move. It was true that there was some cause for concern as long as someone was still in critical condition, but since they were still alive, there was no need to take things that gravely.

“Anyway, Karen-chan. Did you notice anything strange when you were there?”

“Anything strange?”

“Well… Any points where it would’ve been easier to drown, or places where it would’ve been easier to slip… Or if someone suddenly got weaker while you were camping.”

Since the matter itself was rather vague, the questions concerning it also became ambiguous—for someone with a straightforward personality like Karen, it seemed it didn’t sit well with her, and she frowned and crossed her arms.

"I don't think there was anything like that. We had lots of fun."

"Is that so? …One more thing, just for reference. Were all the people that went camping your coworkers? Did anyone bring their family along? That is—anyone with kids?"

"Huh? Nah. Everyone was an adult."

All right.

Well, as far as I understood, the victims were indeed limited to just kids.

I thought of what Shinobu had said.

"Out of the five cases, four of them were not accidents, but incidents"—despite being so terribly specific at first, she would not say anything more after that. Trying to tempt her with her favorite donuts didn't help, either.

It seemed Shinobu had her own standards.

Standards for assisting me, not helping other people.

Even though the Rumors Squad had taken me on due to my mutual understanding with an oddity, at this rate, it felt like I wouldn't be able to live up to that.

Speaking of which, was it three out of five people that had testified that they'd been pulled into the water by an "invisible hand"? Excluding the one that was still unconscious, it was three out of four—turning that around, it meant that one out of those four hadn't given any such testimony.

If I took Shinobu's words at face value that four out of those five cases were not accidents but incidents, then that implied one out of those five was not an incident but an accident—was that case the one kid who didn't see the "invisible hand"?

If that was true, then I was more curious about what that kid's testimony was.

If they had said that they had or hadn't seen an "invisible hand" at the time, they might have just been written off as saying something weird, but, well, that was just how oddity stories went.

I decided to look into it properly, without dismissing it as "something that kids just said".

I'd already sent a report in, but I decided to let Suou-san know what I planned on doing next after I finished eating.

It may not be putting old wine in new bottles, but I decided to follow in the footsteps of an old specialist and put in some legwork—because there was something you just couldn't get from gossip and hearsay. Of course, it was also in my personality to follow through and look into even the smallest things, like who a "friend of a friend" was…

"What, nii-chan, don't go to work now! I know your dream is to be on-site all the time, but when you're in training, you're totally

free to just sit around and relax."

"Well, it's been a long time since I've been back here, so I figured I'd brush up on the lay of the land."

"Even though you had no idea about that river? Why don't you go meet up with some old friends instead? Hanekawa-san and Tsukihi-chan are both overseas, but there have to be some other people you wanna meet, right?"

I felt like Hanekawa being overseas and Tsukihi being overseas should have been treated with completely different nuances, but… For that matter, there were a lot of people that were around me that ended up going overseas, huh? I guess my high school days were full of people with talent that went undervalued in Japan.

Regardless, if I were to take this as a chance to reconnect with old friends… Well, it wasn't like I didn't have any friends, but… Even though it's true now, I didn't really have a good social network back then, did I?

Because having friends lowers my intensity as a human.

Was what I had thought.

Maybe I was just being ungrateful, but there were people I didn't want to meet, and people that were just unpleasant to meet. There were plenty of them.

As I thought that, it felt like my teenage years had not been very good.

Though I had already been aware of that, this just served to confirm it again.

And I had a persecution complex that if I met up with people, they'd just despise me as some career-oriented rascal—I couldn't get into the mindset of returning home loaded with honors.

Why did I have to feel like I was some criminal in hiding?

"I guess you're right. Maybe I'll go see how Kanbaru is, at least. What's she up to these days? I know she got into a college for athletics… If everything went well, she should be a fourth-year by now? She didn't quit like Tsukihi did, right?"

"As for her, she's aiming to be a doctor," was the response I got back from Karen.

Speaking of which, she was closer to Kanbaru than she was to Hanekawa, wasn't she?

Since they were both sports-minded… That's right, in the first place, it was me who introduced them.

That happened, too, huh?

It makes me feel all nostalgic.

"Hoh, a doctor? In that case, if she's aiming to go to graduate school for a doctorate, then she'd probably be studying for entrance exams again right now. Well, from what I can remember, she had a

pretty good head on her shoulders…”

“Ah. That ain’t it, nii-chan,” said Karen in an accent for some reason, correcting my thoughts. “Not that kind of doctor, but an actual doctor.”

“What kind of doctor?”

“Like, a physician.”

“A physician?”

Even if I wanted to make amends for neglecting my friends, I'd been thinking that I'd have all of four months to do so, so there was no need to worry (although that kind of thinking was what prompted my feelings of ingratitude). However, as fate would have it, on the very next day, I ended up in an unexpected reunion with my junior from high school named Kanbaru Suruga.

On the morning of the next day, I went around with Suou-san to visit all of the children that had drowned to hear what they had to say—but unfortunately, we didn't get any results.

It ended up just being a reconfirmation of what we already knew. The ones that supposedly saw the "invisible hand" claimed to have seen it, and the one that supposedly didn't see it claimed that he absolutely did not see it.

Well, we technically got results in that we were able to hear their accounts firsthand (it wasn't easy to get kids to talk to you, but Suou-san was great in that respect). Either way, since we had visited four out of the five kids that had drowned, we decided we might as well visit the remaining one.

The one that was still unconscious and unable to speak.

"When you see the face of the person involved, your motivation changes, right?" said Suou-san when she made the suggestion, and there were no complaints on my end.

And so, we had come to the hospital with flowers in arms to visit the final child (although technically, in terms of when they drowned they were the "first child") when we were met with an unexpected greeting.

"Oh! By the sound of those footsteps, it must be Araragi-senpai, isn't it?"

A cheerful voice called out from the reception desk.

Since we were in a hospital, she naturally didn't come at me at Mach speed the same way she did in high school, but when I turned around, I was unmistakably face-to-face with my junior Kanbaru.

She had grown out her hair again, with it falling long and straight down to her lower back.

And she had opted to go for a nurse look.

Huh? According to my sources, wasn't Kanbaru-kun aiming to become a physician?

Was this cosplay?

"I'm just working part-time! It's a part-time job. And I'm just helping out in the office, too—I'm not even a nurse. It's just policy to dress like this, since if I don't, I might get confused as not being part

of the staff."

It was true that she wasn't even wearing a nurse cap, and when I looked closer, I realized she just had on a blouse and cardigan… I thought that in itself could cause some confusion, but then again, that could be the point of the rule.

Like how I was told to keep wearing a suit and tie during my training period.

"But still… a part-time job?"

"Yeah. I gotta earn money for tuition. After I turned twenty, my grandparents decided to stop supporting me financially."

I'm even paying rent now, said Kanbaru, sticking her chest out in pride.

That boastful way in which she didn't even treat her senpai like they were her senpai was the same as ever, but to be honest, that was indeed something to be proud about—compared to me, who had been dependent on his parents all the way through his college graduation.

Anyway, while her lively demeanor and peppy attitude (as well as her boastful attitude) was the same as when she was in high school, the 22-year-old Kanbaru Suruga had naturally grown up since then—although it was possible that the impression she gave off was stronger due to us having run into her at her workplace.

Even though I had thought she was still a student…

It really felt like she'd gotten ahead of me.

"Is this someone you know, Araragi-kun? In that case, I'll go on ahead, so you can take your time here and come later."

"Ah, no, Suou-san… I mean, we are in the middle of work, after all."

"It's fine, it's fine! Social interaction is a part of our work, too. They're always like, 'cherish your local connections!' and all that."

Without allowing me to refuse, Suou-san forced me to stay where I was before heading towards the room of the child we intended to visit—though I was thankful, she sure was one pushy senpai.

"Sorry, Kanbaru. Even though you're probably working right now."

"Nah, I don't mind! The morning rush just ended, so I thought it was a good time for a breather, anyway."

Though I didn't know if that was really the case or if she was just saying that out of consideration for me, hearing it did make me feel more at ease.

It would definitely be the former if it were the Kanbaru I knew in high school, but after her learning of the toils of hard work, it could very well be the latter as well.

Anyway, seeing as I'd been left behind, I decided to take up Suou-san on her offer—Kanbaru and I moved to the break area. Because I wanted to seem like I was still some kind of senpai to her, I treated her to some juice from the vending machine.

"Araragi-senpai, I'd heard rumors that you'd become a police detective or something, but was that pretty lady earlier your senpai? I didn't know you were back in town, though. You should've given me a call!"

"I just barely got back, you see. I thought I'd do that once things settled down."

It sounded a lot like an excuse, and in reality it really was an excuse, but even as I said it we clinked our cans together as a toast to our reunion. We were indeed both of drinking age, but considering it was the middle of the day and we were both in the middle of work, getting alcohol could be going a bit too far.

"How'd you hear that I became a detective?"

I thought it would be from Karen, but the answer I got was completely different.

"From Ougi-kun," she responded—hmm.

That basically meant that information about me was being leaked to her.

"When I heard the news, I was thinking, 'That guy has grown up to be a fine young man now, hasn't he?' I was so proud."

"What's that supposed to mean!?"

"Do you work here, now? I was sure that you wouldn't come back to this town again. I was sure you'd passed on."

"Well, this is at the very least just for the training period, so I don't know what'll happen afterward… and 'passed on'!?"

I had nothing to say in response.

In some form or another I was a government official, so even if I wasn't a professional baseball player, my destination was something I couldn't decide by myself.

And that was especially the case when Gaen-san's plans could sink their teeth into me at any moment.

"How about you, Kanbaru? Why a physician? I was sure you'd aim for becoming a professional basketball player or something… Or is there even a league for women's basketball yet? Maybe a corporate team…"

"Ah, basketball? I felt like that's something I saw through to completion. Although I still play for fun, on days off with friends."

"Friends. I see."

It was a word I hadn't used even once when I was in college.

I'm envious of your satisfying college life.

"But still, to become a physician. In this vast ocean we call life,

isn't that a pretty drastic change of course? You're going from an athlete to a doctor."

"Nah, I'd already been thinking about it in my last year of high school. I went to a college for athletics because I wanted to stay active, but I chose the medical department because of what I wanted to do in life. …That is, become a sports doctor."

"A sports doctor?"

In other words, a doctor that specialized in preventing sports-related accidents or injuries, and helping with physical therapy, huh?

As I heard that, everything made perfect sense.

That's right. When I was still attending college in this town, Kanbaru had reunited with an old friend of hers—someone who had once been a rival, before she had been forced to retire after an injury that occurred during a game.

And while it wasn't due to an injury, Kanbaru herself had had to withdraw from the court after her left arm was rendered unusable. It was probably because of those bitter experiences that she chose this path.

Such splendid reasons.

My kouhai was so dazzling that I felt like I was being purified…

"To think that this Kanbaru Suruga, who would speak of nothing but boobs and panties, would become like this… It's a story I wouldn't be able to tell without crying."

"I feel like I spoke of more than just that, though."

"Then, you've stopped reading BL novels by now, right?"

"Oh, no, those I still have an interest in."

Was that so.

In any case, it was a far cry from how I responded to the question of why I became a police officer with, "because my parents were"—this kouhai was too much.

She'd become too good to be true.

I was glad I ran into her like this.

Seeing how I felt like this now, I could tell that I had had some hesitation about meeting Kanbaru again, afraid of what kind of person she had turned into.

Considering Kanbaru's mother was in fact Gaen-san's older sister, there had been the possibility of not me but Kanbaru being used as one of Gaen-san's pawns, but it seemed that avenue no longer existed.

That string of fate had been cut.

A completely clean cut.

Although I didn't want to acknowledge it, it seemed that that con man, Kaiki Deishuu, had anticipated Gaen-san's movements and

chopped down that string of fate in advance—looks like everyone and their mother was trying to get ahead of one another.

Would I be able to become like those adults?

"It's not as simple as it sounds, though. I already felt like I wanted to quit a couple times. I've even started to think more pragmatically about if it would be okay to just take any position that deals with medical care. Like with basketball, even though I said that I 'saw it through to completion', despite how I was said to be at a super high school level, I just ended up being discouraged at a college level."

"……"

"The world is vast. I thought there was no one scarier than Senjougahara-senpai, but after going to college, I met dozens of people that were even scarier than her… Although I never met anyone that I liked more than her, so I did feel that my outlook was narrow."

"…That's right. There are tons of crazy people in this world," I agreed, from the bottom of my heart.

Those feelings remained, even as I entered the working society.

Even in spite of the Rumors Squad being one of Gaen-san's schemes, I had never imagined that there was a girl that had turned into a mermaid after eating the "mermaid flesh".

I'd never thought that I'd been particularly special for having my blood sucked by the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, but the Rumors Squad boasted a lineup of members with histories that could easily brush any conceited thoughts away.

Kind of like how "one in a million" actually meant quite a lot of people when thinking on a global scale.

"Crazy people, but incredible people, too. If there's a monster that's the only one of her kind, it'd be Hanekawa."

"Ah."

Kanbaru gave me a subtle look of understanding.

Though they hadn't interacted much with each other, Hanekawa probably still left a big impression on her.

"Is she still alive and well?"

"She's still alive—from what I can tell. Apparently I'd get some sort of message if she ended up dying."

"What kind of life is she even living?"

Hearing that, she's probably not the type of person to give up before accomplishing something, said Kanbaru.

It wouldn't be a surprise to lose all your motivation when comparing yourself to Hanekawa, but, as I expected, it was different for a star who had been prominent for a generation.

Her conviction was different.

It didn't seem like she was just going to stop with high school

being her glory years.

"By the way, Araragi-senpai, what business do you have at the hospital?"

"You can stop adding senpai, now. We're not high schoolers anymore."

"To me, you will forever be my senpai, Araragi-senpai!"

"Really, this junior is too much."

As I said that, I wondered to myself if this could be considered fate—I doubted that Kanbaru was aware of every patient that entered this big hospital, but I didn't think there could be that many unconscious children that had been hospitalized.

"As you guessed, I'm here for work. —Do you know about that kid?"

"Oh, the one that drowned in the river… Even though that river wasn't supposed to be that dangerous. I guess maybe it's changed since I've been there?"

Of course, she knew about it already.

Do you love going camping, too?

Although I already knew that she did.

"For the police to get involved, does that mean they judged that this was some sort of incident? Like they were held down in the water, or were pushed in, or something."

"Well, my job is really to make that judgment. It would be better if it wasn't an incident—although I suppose there's no 'better' when a person has drowned. …What do you know about that kid's condition?"

"I'm not directly involved in treatment, so I can't say for sure, but I don't think it's looking good for them. There are no signs of them regaining consciousness… It's almost like their soul was taken from their body."

"Their soul—"

What kappa took from people was their *shirikodama*, right?

Although I didn't know what *shirikodama* was exactly.

"I want you to keep this a secret, but there have been a lot of similar accidents occurring at that river. At this rate, they'll probably have to close down the whole area."

"No way… If that happens, where will we be able to go camping from now on?"

Then it doesn't matter if they close down the whole area, was the kind of resentful thought I had when I heard that.

Unlike you, I've never had to think about where my friends and I will go camping, and I never will.

"In that case, Araragi-senpai, please do something so that that doesn't happen! …or maybe I shouldn't be asking that from you."

“It’s fine to just ask that from me, but I can’t promise anything. Since it’s really Town Hall who decides that, while I’m just here to investigate.”

“That’s right. Well, then I guess it’ll be fine if I go and ask Town Hall.”

It felt like she actually would go and do that.

Her proactive personality may have even doubled from her high school days.

Since, unlike me, she had plenty of friends from high school, she probably even had some friends that were employed at the Town Hall—was what I had thought. But I would never have guessed that, among the few people I had become acquainted with in high school, one of them would in fact be employed at the Town Hall.

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After visiting the hospital, Suou-san and I grabbed lunch before once again returning on-site to the river—because the duties of the Rumors Squad were different from those of regular police officers, I was a bit bewildered at not being able to make use of what I'd learned at the police academy, but visiting the site a hundred times was finally something that felt police-like.

Although it was only the second time.

And it seemed that Suou-san intended on bringing this to a conclusion on this second visit.

"Since I have plenty of other matters to attend to, too. Even if my seat is off by the window in the office, I'm still pretty busy, you know."

That was because, for reports that were on the level of rumors, they needed to perform a sweep of the entire area with the few people that they had in order to check things in detail.

It seemed that my training was invaluable to the squad, whether it was because I was male, because I was young, because of my vampire attributes, or maybe just because I was an extra helping hand.

Although I hadn't lived up to those expectations just yet… so I'd better work hard.

"Kanbaru… That is, the junior I met earlier liked to come camping around here in the past, but she said she didn't feel anything out of place. I won't go into too much detail, but she's not exactly someone that's unrelated to oddities, so if there was really something lurking in the water, it wouldn't have been unusual if she felt anything…"

"I see… But Araragi-kun, the little vampire in your shadow very clearly said that 'there was something there', didn't she?"

"Yes. But that was all she said, and she wouldn't tell me anything more than that, so…"

"That's fine. That's still good progress for us. And by the way, sorry about earlier, that I had to interrupt your conversation with your junior."

"Ah, no, it's all right. We made plans to meet up again later."

Although I wasn't sure if those plans would really play out or not.

Even though we had managed to talk quite a bit despite having run into each other by chance without an appointment, in reality Kanbaru was probably incredibly busy, balancing her studies with her work—probably even busier than I was. And even if she had a day off,

she'd probably want to spend that precious day off with her friends playing basketball or going camping.

After her outlook was widened, I didn't want her to narrow it again just for me.

She'd met dozens of scary people, but not one she liked more than Senjougahara—even though she'd said something like that, I did think that that could have been a form of consideration for me.

Consideration.

Perhaps I should be happier that my brash junior had learned consideration for others, but that consideration or tactfulness made me feel melancholy instead.

It would be a selfish desire of mine to want her to stay as the brash junior that I knew, and if I told her that, I'm sure she wouldn't be able to continue seeing me as the senpai that she respected.

For forever.

Plus, for someone her age, it wouldn't be weird if she was seeing someone that she was serious about—she wasn't going to stay a 17-year-old girl forever.

As for Senjougahara Hitagi…

I wonder what she's doing now?

"Hm? What's wrong, Assistant Inspector Araragi? Making such a pensive face. Were you thinking of the girl you used to be with or something?"

She sure is sharp. As expected of a detective.

Although it felt more like a woman's intuition than a detective's intuition.

"Well, it's not 'used to be with', since I'm currently still with her. We've been together since high school… We went to the same college, and we broke up twice, and got back together twice."

"Huh. Then isn't it weird to be yearning for her? Didn't you two shack up together after graduating college?"

"We did shack up together once in college… But she found work at a company overseas, you see."

And that was to follow her father.

I had been aware of the fact that Hitagi's father worked for an overseas company, but what was surprising was that Hitagi went to work for a rival company—by picking the same trade but a different company, she wasn't even trying to hide the complex she had towards her father, but, as if in revenge towards her the impoverished life she led at the Tamikura Apartments, she was now making waves as an up-and-coming financial trader, if I were to exaggerate a bit.

It's pretty amazing what she was getting up to while I was in the police academy.

Really, everyone just loves going overseas, huh?

You're all lacking in patriotism.

"Araragi-kun, it's not like you came back to your hometown because you wanted to, either. You shouldn't act like you're being patriotic, either. If we go by Gaen-san's motto, then Japanese people playing an active role overseas is something to be proud of. Wouldn't it be amazing if we had a network like the overseas Chinese?"

Gaen-san's final objective was probably something along those lines—with agents you can dispatch, like the FBI or the MI5—said Suou-san, though I couldn't tell if she was joking or being serious.

"Well, I suggest you contact her frequently, so that the relationship doesn't just die out naturally. Police detectives in particular have it tough in marriage—even I've had to break up with five or six people after getting this job."

Although that could be just because of her personality. But I kept my mouth shut about that.

But whoops, I spoke too much about my private life.

Even if we were in an open workplace, I didn't want it to be a place where I talked about everything and anything.

But I'll take her advice to heart anyway. Not because she was a detective, but because she was my senpai in life.

Since I was ungrateful and bad at keeping in touch, and I'd cut several ties that way before—thinking about it now, I was lucky to have gotten back with her even twice. I needed to make sure it wouldn't occur a third time.

"So, Suou-san. How did it look for that kid?"

In the end, while I spent my time talking in the break area, Suou-san had returned from the hospital room far earlier than I had expected, and I hadn't been able to get a look at the final child's face.

"I didn't get a look, either. There were no visitors allowed. … Apparently that wasn't the case yesterday, so they may have gotten worse. The situation may be more urgent than we thought."

"……"

"Luckily, thanks to the nurse in charge, I got ahold of all their personal information. The parents both work, so they often have the child watch the house—or rather, they often leave their child alone. But you wouldn't think that that happened with how cheerful the kid is, and they're the type that likes to take the lead when with other kids, which is what led to the drowning."

It was a topic that was difficult to broach inside the hospital.

It wasn't because she had other matters to attend to that Suou-san wanted to hurry and finish up this case, although that was probably one of the reasons—though she always gave off the impression of finishing up her work quickly, it seemed her motivation had gone up after having been unable to see the child's face.

“It would be awful if these cheerful kids were to lose their playground.”

I ended up coming up with a rather banal comment.

They were embarrassing thoughts that exposed my shallowness as a person, but the resentful thoughts I had of wanting them to close down the river to prevent camping had all but disappeared by now.

“This is just conjecture, but it does give off the impression that only children are being targeted. Since there are no victims that are adults… Even my sister recently went fishing here, but nothing went wrong then.”

“Karen-chan, right?”

“So you knew about her? The foolish but prideful sister of the Araragi family.”

“Well, she does stand out, after all. Mood makers like her give off a good impression.”

It would’ve been good if she joined the Rumors Squad, said Suou-san, but that would certainly be impossible—given her character, she herself could be considered a kind of urban legend or ghost story.

Frankly, without even me needing to deceive her, she stubbornly refused to believe that the damage she took upon her body from the con man was the work of an oddity—if I had had her strength, I probably wouldn’t have been reduced into being a vampire, either.

Or perhaps, as someone who’d been reduced into being a mermaid, it was because Suou-san felt that way that she sought out a mood maker for the Rumors Squad.

“Our squad is missing a mood maker, you see. So we had some expectations from that girl’s brother.”

“Well, sorry about that. For being a mood breaker.”

“Oh, don’t worry. Although, even though I’m not really in the mood, perhaps we should follow in Karen-chan’s footsteps and all go fishing together?”

And like that, Suou-san threw off her coat—and after giving it to me, she continued on by taking off her shirt, skirt, stockings, and garterbelt, one by one.

She was taking off her clothes as naturally as if she were in her own home.

Though I’d heard about it beforehand, this grandiose display made me a bit self-conscious—it was a grandioseness that made yesterday’s changing in the shadow of a tree seem almost shameful.

Of course, Suou-san naturally was wearing a swimsuit underneath it all.

It was a one-piece bathing suit like what Shinobu was wearing

yesterday, but naturally, the impression given off by a young girl wearing one and by a mature woman wearing one was completely different.

Finally, she took off her high heels and began doing warm-up exercises.

"This time, I'll be the bait."

Though the line was probably a reference to the picture book in which Swimmy said, "I'll be the eye," it did eloquently sum up the strategy she had in mind this time—indeed, as she had become a mermaid after eating the "mermaid flesh", her entire body was a bundle of deliciousness.

To the point that she wouldn't even allow a vampire to be called in front of her.

Though it was me who had entered the river yesterday, the plan today was for Suou-san to dive in to lure the oddity out (if there was one)—since the "mermaid flesh" didn't taste good to just vampires.

Mermaids could be considered food to any oddity.

If it weren't for their eternal youth and longevity, they would probably have gone extinct long ago due to overfishing.

In that sense, Suou-san the mermaid was even more valuable than a vampire who had lived for six centuries—and of course, for her, it was a plan that she was reluctant to carry out.

The plan of becoming a mermaid and drawing out oddities by using herself as bait necessitated that she turned into the "half-fish person" that she detested—and, as you could tell from how careful she was around the water yesterday, it was hard to say that that was a trauma that Suou-san had overcome.

"That's for sure. I can't count how many times I tried to kill myself. And I would just come back to life anyway, so even doing that became a pain…"

"…I've heard that the cause of death for immortal vampires is 90 percent suicide."

"Oh. I'm jealous that they're even able to die—or at least, that's what I would've thought in the past."

Suou-san shrugged her shoulders.

Her swimsuit was off-the-shoulder, so the action of shrugging her shoulders stood out even more than usual.

"Half of my body becoming fish is, in other words, a retrogression, after all—having stuff like genuine sharkskin made me want to cry back when I was more sensitive. But if I cried, those tears would just make more scales appear, so I had to endure it until I stopped being so sensitive. At first, I would rip off the scales one by one. But that would just make me bleed, and then there would be

even more scales. Half of my body became fish, but 70 percent of the body is water, so it was hard for me to do anything."

"……"

"Ah, sorry. Did you get turned off by the self-torture? Don't worry about it. I can take those tough memories and make the best out of them for work, now. It's good to have a job that can make use of your strong points, but it's just as good to have a job that can make use of your weak points—as well as a job that you can live a long life in."

As she said that, Suou-san finished up her warm-up exercises and briskly approached the bank of the river—there was no hesitation in her steps. She had surely strengthened her resolve.

I did feel that I would take her place if I could, but unfortunately, as proved by the results of yesterday, vampires apparently didn't make for good bait. As the Oddity Slayer, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire's existence was likely to make itself known to other oddities, but if we turned that around, it meant that she was an existence that oddities could easily avoid. While she could use oddities as bait, she couldn't become bait for oddities.

The only thing I could do was watch over her.

"All right, Araragi-kun. Grab on to this end over here, and if anything happens, pull me out, okay?"

Suou-san handed me a rope that she had tied around her body in a complicated manner. This was almost like fishing, or perhaps even cormorant fishing.

She hadn't simply tied it around her torso—the rope had been complexly interwoven around her body and all four of her limbs. That was surely done because, when she turned into a mermaid, she didn't just slip out of the rope.

It wasn't something I should be imagining, but perhaps because I had just recently run into Kanbaru, it somehow reminded me of "Japanese bondage torture"[1]… Being handed the end of the rope made me feel nervous in more ways than one.

I could only pray that nobody witnessed this scene that looked like I was trying to torture Suou-san, because if we were reported—well, I guess it would be fine, because we were police officers.

None of this felt real to me, still.

"I'm counting on you, Assistant Inspector!"

As if she had read my mind (although it would've been really embarrassing if she could), Suou-san called out to me again using my rank.

"You might want to look away when my appearance changes, but keep your eyes open and fixed on me. If nothing happens even

after I—after the mermaid becomes the bait, we should be able to conclude that these were just accidents. That won't make that kid suddenly regain consciousness, and it won't suddenly heal the injuries of the other kids, but at least we can rule out the irrational. Because we can at least confidently guarantee that there won't be any more victims. For the two of us that have lost our futures, let's protect the yet unseen futures of those to come."

"…Understood."

"All right. And incidentally, if anything does happen to me, don't take any drastic measures in trying to save me. Just report back to the station. Since no matter how bad it gets, I definitely won't die. As long as we're at this river, who's in more danger? The mermaid in her natural habitat, or the vampire who's weak to flowing water? Feel free to leave me behind."

This didn't feel like something that should've been said incidentally, but without waiting for my response, Suou-san yelled "Here we go!" and leapt into the water. As if to substantiate her claim of having been a promising swimming athlete, she swam with a beautiful, streamlined form.

To turn into fish after getting wet.

Putting aside how it actually happened, the wording itself was easy to understand in terms of cause and effect, but to watch that phenomenon, that oddity phenomenon, occur before my very eyes… Well, the impression was certainly different.

It was hugely different, widely different, an order of magnitude different from what I had imagined.

Compared to that stereotypical image of the lower half being the fish and the upper half being a beautiful woman—it was practically the complete opposite. Although, even if that image actually existed, I'm sure it would actually be rather grotesque itself.

At one point, Kanbaru Suruga had had her left arm possessed by a monkey oddity, and her arm had been transformed into a monkey's up to her elbow—but even then, it was still an amalgamation of two primates.

To become half-fish and half-human was something that could not easily be expressed in words, and it held a beauty that could not be expressed through paintings.

This is something I heard later on, but apparently this transformation took on a different appearance every time it occurred—parameters such as the amount of water, the quality of the water, the temperature of the water, and the amount of bacteria in the water all came together to decide what sort of fish would become half of her. The condition of Suou-san herself also factored into the equation.

This time, it was a piranha.

Probably.

Densely-packed scales sprung up all over her body, and densely-packed fangs sprung up inside her mouth.

A half-fish person—was how she had described herself, but looking at her like this, I couldn't even call it "half"—she was basically all fish, with the last remnants of her humanity showing up in the one-piece swimsuit caught in her pectoral and dorsal fins.

It seemed that the rope that she had been tightly bound by would slip off, but it seemed to have somehow gotten tangled up with that swimsuit and managed to retain its shape… While I kept my eyes fixed on her as I was told to, it was a grand display that I could almost describe as pitiful.

I couldn't help but keep my eyes fixed on her.

"Piranhas are actually one of the more preferred kinds," was what Suou-san said, also later on. "There were times when I turned into stuff like deep-sea fish and mollusks, after all—gross doesn't even

begin to describe it. There's a certain charm to fish, but a person becoming half of one is just the worst. I'd be fine with dugongs, at least… but among aquatic animals, it seems like mammals are out."

Speaking of which, there was that theory that what people thought were mermaids were actually dugongs or manatees… I remembered hearing from Hanekawa at some point that the meat of a dugong was extremely tasty.

Maybe even that ended up tying into the legend of the mermaid?

It was so that the five drowning accidents didn't end up tying into a new oddity story that Suou-san had cast herself to the bottom of the river—but, with there being no value to turning into a piranha, nothing ended up happening.

No oddities—no kappa, no crabs—appeared.

There was nothing that seemed like it wanted to prey upon the mermaid.

Though she had taken on a hideous appearance, she surely hadn't lost her ability to think, but Suou-san began to swim forward at the bottom of the river—if I got careless, I could have been pulled into the river from the rope I was holding.

She was probably breathing through gills now, since it seemed she didn't need to come up for air.

Well, fishing wasn't something that produced immediate results, anyway… I should be patiently vigilant about this.

For the Rumors Squad, being unable to fish anything up was really the more desirable result—or maybe fishing with bait wasn't even the right way to describe this?

Even if "mermaid flesh" was a delicacy, oddities did have their own tastes, after all… If that was the case, Suou-san's stripping and transforming would end up being a waste… Well, someone like Suou-san probably wouldn't consider that a waste, though.

She's the kind of person who's aware that useless actions make up the essence of labor.

As her junior, I'll make sure to properly learn this attitude from her.

As I thought that, I sat down on the riverbank. Since it seemed like it would be a drawn-out battle, I figured I'd conserve some mental strength in order to respond more quickly in an emergency… I never had an interest in fishing, but surely not even anglers were constantly on the alert.

They'd wait for a tug.

Even so, to make sure I didn't end up accidentally letting go of the rope, I wrapped the end of it around my wrist—that way, even if Suou-san started to get eaten… Then I suppose I'd just get eaten along

with her?

If that happened, I figured Shinobu would come to my aid…

"Don't just assume things for your own convenience."

With that timing, a voice spoke from my shadow.

"Certainly, if your life is exposed to danger, I will be sure to move with great haste—but that will not necessarily be the case if that mermaid is in crisis."

"Huh?"

Though I ended up saying that out of reflex, there was no further response from my shadow.

What? What did she mean by that? It was surprising in itself that Shinobu was awake in the middle of the day, but it was also surprising that she would come out with something that sounded like a warning—or maybe she was just rebuking me for my selfish thoughts?

It was true that, in high school, I relied a little too much on Shinobu's powers and ended up in some outrageous circumstances. There were some unwanted side effects that came from abusing vampire skills, from utilizing Shinobu's powers as if they were my own—if it weren't for Gaen-san, I probably wouldn't have lived to graduate from high school.

That's why, even if the members of the Rumors Squad were to rely on it, I definitely shouldn't think that "Shinobu will do something about it if it gets dangerous", not even a little bit.

But, right now, was she really only doing nothing more than rebuking me?

Don't just assume things for my own convenience, was exactly right. That was exactly why Shinobu wouldn't take any excess actions in helping me out—even though she told me that this case seemed to be oddity-like, she didn't disclose anything specific.

In other words, it was an attitude even more prudent than Oshino.

Prudent, but reliable.

So the problem was what she said afterwards—that wasn't necessarily the case if that mermaid is in crisis.

That was what Shinobu said.

That was what she was implying.

If we turned that around, didn't that mean that, right now, in real time, the mermaid—Suou-san was in a crisis?

"Suou-san!"

Without really understanding anything, I followed my instincts—my "impulsive and emotional nature", as Karen put it—and stood up and pulled the rope back with all my might.

And though I pulled, it didn't budge a bit.

Considering that the aftereffects of my vampire constitution allowed me to be muscular without even needing to work out, I shouldn't have been completely powerless, but, as if I had landed a huge fish, I was totally unable to pull the rope back.

Or rather.

The rope was pulling me towards the middle of the river.

Was Suou-san trying to move through the water?

No, that was wrong.

Though I couldn't see well through the reflections on the surface of the water, Suou-san was doing somersaults in the water, in pain. It looked almost like she was drowning—even though she was a mermaid?

As if she was suffocating from respiratory failure—even though she had gills?

"…….!"

In any case, Suou-san was no longer in a condition where she could pull me in… That mermaid was definitely in a "crisis". Then, where was that force that was pulling in the rope coming from?

The "invisible hand"?

Even when I looked, not just around Suou-san, but in every nook and cranny in my surroundings and even up to the sky, there was nothing that seemed like it could be an oddity. Even if I looked out for those "bad things" that preceded the coming of an oddity, I couldn't feel anything at all.

But I was no longer the boy I was in high school.

Even though I couldn't say I had insight on every oddity in the world, since there was definitely something odd happening right now, there was no way that I couldn't feel a single thing wrong.

Even the "invisible hand" that the drowned children said they saw was something that I should be able to see—or maybe this wasn't an oddity phenomenon at all? Was Suou-san simply drowning just as the five children had before her? Was this just the sixth drowning accident to occur—

It wasn't the time to be thinking about that right now.

If the rope wouldn't budge no matter how hard I pulled, then I'd give up on that approach—shit, I wish I'd worn my swimsuit today, too. Thinking that, I jumped into the river.

Unfortunately, with a form less like the beautiful form of a fish and more like what would be used as an example of bad form, I promptly bounced off the surface of the water.

It was like how, if you didn't reduce your surface area when entering the water, the resistance of the water felt like concrete—but what was different was what happened just before I would've entered.

I rolled over the surface of the water and slid to the point just

above where Suou-san was struggling, and—and I didn't sink into the water. It was like the entire river had frozen over—except that it wasn't frozen, it was still flowing, and it was still liquid.

Nevertheless, my body wasn't sinking.

As if I were on a huge conveyor belt, I was continually being pushed downstream, but it wasn't at a speed that I couldn't go against. Though I did so clumsily, I was able to move my arms and legs to stay above Suou-san.

However, I couldn't get near her.

I couldn't sink.

It wasn't ice, but it was like the mermaid had been trapped in the middle of a water bed—it was less of an "invisible hand" and more of an "invisible sack" that was impossible to pierce through.

No matter how hard I punched it, the surface would pleasantly bounce back.

There was no doubt about it.

This was absolutely an oddity phenomenon, with no room for error—this had crossed the limit of simply being a rumor.

But really, what kind of oddity was it? To be able to create all this strangeness without even showing even the slightest bit of it—

"…No, that's not it."

It wasn't invisible because it was an oddity—it was invisible because it was transparent.

For example, it could be invisible because it was "water" itself, which was high in transparency.

Neither kappa nor mermaids nor crabs.

"—The river itself is the oddity!?"

Then even mermaids would drown.

It would be like, on land, if the air itself could bite you. No matter how hard you tried, humans were unable to resist changes in air pressure. Plus, even if you had gills, that didn't change the fact that you were breathing in oxygen.

That's why even fish would suffocate in water with low oxygen levels.

Like how just throwing goldfish into a tank wasn't the same as actually taking care of it—if you didn't properly set up an oxygen pump, the goldfish would suffer a living hell, gasping for air above the surface of the water.

Water might be the mermaid's natural habitat, but if the water itself was the enemy, any mermaid would die from drowning.

No.

It would be better if they could die.

But Suou-san couldn't. She couldn't die like vampires could. Really, considering vampires had an obvious weakness in sunlight,

mermaids had a much simpler kind of immortality that far surpassed them—if what I experienced over spring break was hell, then what Suou-san was experiencing now was a living hell.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!"

I didn't expect anything from repeatedly hitting the surface of the water—it took a lot of effort just staying where I was. Despite being in the miraculous position of being able to crawl on top of the water, I couldn't do the normal thing of just sinking into the water.

It felt like the flow of the river got faster, too.

Since I was attached to Suou-san via rope, I was able to not be pulled downstream, but it felt like our positions were reversed… Normally, I should be the one that needed to pull Suou-san out, but now I couldn't do anything but watch as Suou-san drowned—as Suou-san continued to drown without even being able to die.

I couldn't do anything but watch.

But that was all I needed to do.

Even as she struggled with her entire body, even as she continued to drown, even as she stayed unable to breathe or speak, Suou-san looked up at me through the surface of the water—but she had never once been looking at me for help.

With those strong piranha eyes.

With those eyes filled with a strong determination, she was trying to bring something to my attention.

She kept flapping her mouth open to try and tell me something—and it was definitely not in the way a "drowning goldfish" would. However, no matter what Suou-san was shouting at me—no matter what sort of plan she had to try and escape from this crisis, it wouldn't reach me from within the water.

Despite being anticipated for my ability to communicate with oddities, something this irritating was a first—there was no way I could even begin to understand the movements of a piranha's mouth, no matter how hard I stared at Suou-san's mouth to try and read her lips.

But, just as I was starting to despair, I suddenly plunged into the water. Though I had braced myself against the water, increasing my points of contact unlike how I was supposed to, in order to not be washed away by the current, I suddenly—as if it was a matter of course—sank into the river with a splash.

As if I'd stepped on a pitfall, I sank in a straight line towards Suou-san.

I would have never been able to guess what had actually happened.

What Suou-san was doing was not shouting, but singing.

The "mermaid's song".

If it was within the range of common knowledge that the “mermaid’s flesh” gave rise to eternal youth and longevity, then it was within the range of common knowledge that the “mermaid’s song” had the power to sink ships—for a song that could sink even the most unsinkable of ships, it wasn’t hard to sink a single person.

And so I was able to reach Suou-san.

But of course, I would have never been able to guess that that wasn’t even Suou-san’s intention.

It wasn’t that unreasonable to assume that, despite telling me to leave her behind in an emergency with a calm face, she looked to me for help when it came down to it—but if that wasn’t the case, it was clear that she wanted to get me to do something.

The “invisible hand”.

Regardless of whether being brought into the inside of the water bed changed the reflectivity or whether my scrambling about changed the transparency, I was able to distinctly see the hand that should have been invisible.

I was able to see the hand that was grabbing Suou-san’s body, as if it was grabbing not a piranha but a squirming eel—but the role I’d given was not to pull that hand off of her.

What I was supposed to do was—take the hand that was grabbing Suou-san.

The hand of the child that was reaching out for help.

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line for this case.

Even though, back in my high school days, Oshino Meme had thoroughly instructed me on how stupid it was to try and resolve oddity phenomena through violence, I had come dangerously close to making the same mistake again. What was the point of saying “I was no longer the boy I was in high school”? If I did the same thing whether I was able to see oddities or not, then there was no meaning to it at all.

The fact that I’d made so many misunderstandings was also just like it was in high school.

When Shinobu had said that of the five drowning accidents, four of them were not accidents but incidents, I had easily jumped to the conclusion that the child who had not claimed to see the “invisible hand” was the one who had simply gotten into an accident, but that wasn’t the case—whether it was “visible” or “invisible” was simply based on each person’s disposition and circumstances.

It wouldn’t have been strange if there were only two, or even one, that testified to see it.

Then, what was the case that Shinobu ruled out as an “accident”? That was, in fact, the case of the “first” to drown.

The case of the unconscious child, whom we were unable to visit as a result of no visitors being allowed—it was only that case that was an accident, and the four that followed were incidents.

They were oddity phenomena.

Though I said as much, a sharper person would probably have been able to figure out the truth much faster… I was, regrettably, too slow on the uptake.

In short, for the four cases that followed—the “invisible hand” that pulled the four children down into the water was the hand of the “first” one. Well, at this point, the wording of “pulling down” was not exactly correct anymore.

Because all that hand was doing was reaching out for help.

“It’s something like a living ghost, I suppose. One that possessed the water. It makes sense that the child never regained consciousness, even after all this time. That’s because their consciousness had become the very water that they drowned in, and were continuing to drown all this time—”

Suou-san, who had gotten back out of the water, was speaking in a dejected tone.

The parts of her body that she wiped with a bath towel were

turning back into human skin.

"—It must have been so painful for them. Even drowning for just a few minutes made me think, for the first time in a while, that 'dying was better than this'."

"…It was like their soul was taken from their body, was what my junior said."

There was no way I would've been able to guess with such a vague hint, but perhaps those who could guess would've been able to —their soul hadn't been taken but had been continuing to drown.

That's why—they were reaching out for help. In a daze.

In a daze—in the water.

Having become the water itself.

"The reason why they only sought help from other kids is also a painful one. It's because they didn't have any trust in adults."

"……"

Since both parents worked, they left their child to be independent, which, put in a bad way, meant that they neglected their child. So for them, an adult wasn't someone they could reach out to for help.

Learning the reason why there was no response to me diving down to the bottom of the river yesterday—why there wasn't even a trace of that child, as if they were trying to hide themselves… It made me reflect on myself as well.

So that was it.

Though in the past, I was mentally childish enough to play around with grade schoolers even as a high school student, right now, even if I was still immature, I'd become a proper adult.

People will only become what they're able to become.

It was possible that that wasn't just limited to occupations, but applied to becoming adults, as well.

Though I had thought about finding the time to visit the Kitashirahebi Shrine at some point, I felt like I now understood the reason why my legs wouldn't turn in that direction—the thought of no longer being able to see Hachikuji Mayoi as I was now made me freeze in fear.

But, on top of that, it was possible that there were a lot of things that I was no longer able to see—opposite to how Kanbaru's outlook had widened, my field of vision had grown astonishingly dim.

As if the transparency had turned to zero.

However, in the midst of that resolution, there was a single thread of salvation.

Because in terms of adults, Suou-san, who was even older than me, still got a response from the "invisible hand"—because they reached out to her for help, just as they had for the other four children

that had gotten pulled in.

This could be explained by the “first” child ending up pursuing the “mermaid’s flesh” out of a desire to survive, but my explanation differed from that.

It was because Suou-san had visited their hospital room, even though she hadn’t been unable to meet them.

She had brought flowers, and tried to see their face, even if they couldn’t speak to her.

They weren’t just another profile, and they weren’t just another point in the investigation. Suou-san had treated this child in critical condition as another human being—and tried to save them.

It was because these earnest thoughts reached them that the “invisible hand” clung to her, even when she was an adult—though the river stubbornly rejected me when I tried to jump in after her, it still refused to let go of Suou-san.

…I’m really reflecting on my actions, okay?

To think that running into my junior by chance and leaving the hospital visit to my senpai would bring about such a dilemma—while a mistake like this would’ve been forgiven in high school, as a public servant, the mistake was unforgivable enough that I could be made to resign just from that.

Well, actually, the high school Araragi Koyomi that tried to save anyone and everyone was just barely tolerated at that… I couldn’t say that I wouldn’t have had a millimeter of the feeling that “even if I visited the unconscious child, it was only for my own satisfaction”.

It made me laugh.

Wasn’t it that my reason for living used to be for my own satisfaction?

“Try not to criticize yourself too much. The one who really wants to do that is me, after all—being so helpless in front of Mr. Newbie over here makes me want to die from embarrassment. Although I can’t die.”

Suou-san, who had mostly returned to a human form, was lying spread-eagled on the river bank—it seemed that the towel had done all it could, and her next step was to bask in the sun to dry herself out.

She really was an expert on her own constitution.

Although, for a mermaid, it seemed less like sunbathing and more like becoming sun-dried.

“I only figured out the truth after I started to drown, too. Since the last time I drowned was the very first time I entered a pool, it actually felt rather fresh to me, and the shock of it all made me understand—like a dying message.”

Was it like how people's ability to think spikes up when they're about to die?… At least, it seemed it was an effective way of thinking for mermaids, if they were in such a deadly situation that they wanted to die.

Was that the reason why I'd come across some awesome (awful) ideas when on the verge of death?… It was like a five-year-old mystery had just been solved.

"Well, it's not a way of thinking that I'm proud of. And in the end, Araragi-kun, you were the one to take the kid's hand. That was something I wouldn't have been able to do."

Suou-san tried to comfort me, as even though I had gotten out of the water, my feelings had sunk. But even if that was the truth, it didn't comfort me in the slightest.

The only reason Suou-san couldn't grasp the hand of the child that was grasping her for help was simply that, because she had become a mermaid, her hands had turned into fins.

That was why Suou-san brought me into the water.

I was just an adult that had been rejected by the river, and besides, I'd been attacking the waterbed with all my might, so it was really the "mermaid's song" that brought me into the world of the water—into the soul that was reaching out for help.

So I was just acting in her place.

In Suou-san's place, I took the hand of the child that had reached out to Suou-san for help—and that was good enough.

That was enough to return the flow of the river back to normal.

It was actually Suou-san that pulled me out of the river when I started to drown. Because she had taken a form with lots of sharp piranha teeth, the brand new suit I had worn for training hadn't just become wet, it had become torn.

Well, I'd rather lose my suit than my life.And not just my life, but the life of the drowned child, too.

"Thanks to you, Araragi-kun, I'm sure that child's soul has gone back to their body… That means the worst is over, and they'll probably soon wake up. It's all up to the doctor, now."

"…That kid probably isn't aware of the fact that they pulled in four others, right?"

"I hope so. Although they probably just grabbed the others in a daze, so… What? Are you saying that, because even broken bones were involved, that that kid should take responsibility for it, even if they were just asking for help?"

"No, of course that wasn't what I was trying to say."

"Jeez, your stubbornness is just what I'd expect from a career man."

“Like I said, that’s not it!”

Although, if I had experienced this in my high school days, I would’ve left feeling dissatisfied just ending this by saying, “I feel sorry for the kids that drowned”. But I felt that it was in order to face these feelings of dissatisfaction that I became a policeman as well.

“Well, forgive them for my sake, all right? Disregarding what happened to me, they did end up letting go of the four others in the end… And if their soul returned to their body, then there won’t be any more repeated drowning accidents occurring at this river. The riverbank won’t need to be blocked off, and it’ll serve as a great place to go camping or fishing with your friends for years to come. What a happy ending.”

Quickly wrapping up the case as if it were some fairy tale, Suou-san changed the subject by asking, “I’m mostly dry now, so can you get me my clothes?” I guess she’s just the kind of person that was soft on children.

Well, that’s fine.

It wasn’t like I hated children, either—at least, that was what I thought in high school.

“Huh? Suou-san, you came with your swimsuit underneath your clothes, didn’t you? Are you going to put your clothes back on over it, after swimming?”

“Ah. Damn it, I forgot to bring a change of underwear. Again.”

“What are you, a kid? ‘Again?’ It’s almost as if this happens all the time.”

“Weeell, it doesn’t feel comfortable anymore, and I pretty much exposed myself when I turned into a piranha, so I may as well just take off the swimsuit… Sorry, Araragi-kun. Even though we just barely got to know each other, I’m showing you another unbecoming side of me.”

“Please don’t worry about it. I’ve become used to seeing girls half-naked after just barely getting to know them.”

“What kind of life are you leading?”

In the end, after taking off her swimsuit to dry, Suou-san put it back on to wear her clothes over it. Since her appearance at least looked dignified, she seemed a lot more like police than me in my half-dry, tattered suit.

“Well, let’s report back to the station. If we do that, I’m sure the chief will reward us with another job!”

Though her attempt to take up a businesslike attitude right after trying to save a kid while nearly drowning herself wasn’t particularly persuasive, I had no objections to that persuasion.

Besides, in order to make up for all the points I lost in this shameful debut case, I wanted to show off my good side to my senpai

in the next case.

"Uh, huh? Wait a second, Suou-san."

"What is it? Is there something else in this river? Or did you want to go camping? Why not put in a request to the chief? We can all go as a welcoming party for you."

"No, no, that's not it… There probably won't be any repeated drowning accidents anymore, but the first case of drowning was different from the other four, wasn't it? If the other four were pulled in by the 'invisible hand', then how exactly did the 'first' child end up drowning?"

According to what Karen and Kanbaru said, there hadn't been even a single accident at this river up until now, so I wondered if it was all right to leave this as "just a drowning accident".

And to that, Suou-san said,

"Well, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Our job is just to deal with the mysterious while they're still rumors, after all."

And, rubbing the back of her head as if caught off guard, she said,

"If we don't leave at least one mystery unsolved, we'll have nothing to do."

That was truly something only an adult could say.

Nozomi Golem

001

When I was told that Kizashima Nozomi was a golem, it wasn't something that I could immediately accept. At that point in time, I was being informed of what sorts of talented people had been assembled for the Rumors Squad, but when I was told that the true identity of the short girl in front of me was a golem, I could only think that it was some sort of inside joke. But it was not.

Her rank was Inspector, her age was twenty-nine, and her true identity was a golem.

I hadn't been sure whether I was supposed to laugh or not, so it was good that I didn't laugh.

If I had to describe her, I would say she had a kind of dreamy atmosphere almost like a fairy, but it seemed that that was just a result of her creators' preferences, and it wasn't something I should bring up—her creators, in this case, meant her grandparents.

In actuality, she apparently came down with a serious illness when she was in elementary school, and soon after lost her life. She hadn't been "close to dying", and she hadn't been "on the verge of death"—she had actually died. Her organs ceased functioning, her pupils dilated, her muscles stiffened, her blood stopped flowing, and her brain cells withered away.

She died.

No matter how optimistically a medical examiner looked at her, she had completely lost her life.

However, before her soul could be destroyed, her grandparents grabbed ahold of it by its tail—and mixed it in with the mud that they had prepared in advance. They thoroughly mixed and scrambled it until it became firmly attached, until it was impossible to separate her consciousness from the mud, and then they finally shaped it into human form.

Into the form of their granddaughter.

They even made each and every strand of hair out of mud.

And the final result was, believe it or not, the golem, Kizashima Nozomi.

"Yes. Therefore, even though I look like a person on the outside, I'm really more like a figurine—the inside of me is completely and thoroughly packed with mud. I'm just a lump of dirt that isn't what she looks like. Although they occasionally remade me here and there to match my age, my grandparents eventually passed away when I was in middle school—they hadn't prepared mud dolls for themselves, you see. Or perhaps they had completely been exhausted from making me. As such, my appearance has stayed the same since

then, which is what you see now."

Although I'd often be seen as mature for my age—said Kizashima Nozomi innocently.

"Well, it does make me immortal, in a sense. It's not guaranteed that my soul will stay affixed to this mud doll forever, but I'm sure it will last through your training period, Assistant Inspector Araragi, so I'll be in your care for now. Please don't look down on me because of my baby face, okay? Because even if my appearance hasn't followed suit, I've properly grown up mentally."

She drove that nail into me on our first meeting.

Since I myself knew a young girl that had lived for about six hundred years, there was really no need to worry about that front, but the association I had made at the time was not to the young vampire girl but to a little doll girl—yes, the girl named Ononoki Yotsugi that had once stayed as a freeloader at the Araragi household.

Although, in her case, she was a doll that *didn't* contain a soul.

Far from being a mud doll, she was actually a corpse doll.

Therefore, it was hard for me to really understand what it meant for a doll to contain a soul—and I would probably finish my training period without becoming able to understand.

A four-month period was much too short for us to reach a mutual understanding.

No, it would probably be hard even if we had our entire lives.

Even if we happened to both be immortal, and even if we both happened to be burdened by similar pasts, it wouldn't exactly be easy to share those pasts with one another.

The same as it was with any two people.

002

I would have assumed that the case of a randomly attacking phantom slasher would have had Crime Squad 1 in charge of it, but apparently the investigation actually had to do with an oddity known as the ‘phantom slasher’.

It happened on the road that led to Naoetsu High.

Yes, *that* Naoetsu High.

Apparently, high schoolers on their way back from school were slashed at from behind by a sharp implement, and this occurred multiple times—if this was true, then it would blow up into a huge incident that would hit the national papers, but the only reason it hadn’t already was because none of the victims witnessed any villains waving a huge knife, and the only things that were slashed were their uniforms, with not a scratch to be seen on their bodies.

The damage only went as far as the uniforms.

Of course, if there really did exist such a villain, then we couldn’t just leave this alone in case the crimes escalated, but it was a little hard to believe that any villain (or even any good person) would be able to pull off a trick like slashing open just the uniform without any of the victims noticing.

Perhaps it could have miraculously been done once or twice, but the number of victims had hit the double digits—if this was really the work of a human, then that human could only be on the level of Ishikawa Goemon.

It wouldn’t be a miracle but a superhuman feat.

However, while it would be a huge incident if it was the work of a human, it would be just as huge an incident if it wasn’t the work of a human, either.

It was only on the level of a rumor at the moment, but if there really did exist this ‘phantom slasher’ oddity, then that meant the school was involved.

And as a graduate, I couldn’t ignore that.

I had to do something about it.

Well, it’s not like I was a student with that much school pride… Rather, for most of the time I spent at that school, I was pretty much full of hate for it.

In class I would fervently pray that, if meteors were to fall on to the Earth, they would hit this school—remembering those turbulent feelings that I had at the time made me once again realize how hard-hearted I was in high school.

No matter how much I hated it, I shouldn’t try to drop meteors on it.

It's amazing that they even let me graduate.

Though I'd spent my high school days looking down on (or really looking up at) the distasteful "elite" with a certain sort of pity for being victims of a test-results-focused education, I had ironically returned home five years later as one of those distasteful career men that had passed the state exam… If the me from back then saw me as I was now, I'm sure he'd give me a good beating.

But y'knooow, I can't help but think that I reeeally had a looot of fun back then.

My memories are reeeally glistening like gold.

Haaah.

"What are you making such an ostentatious sigh for, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

asked Kizashima-senpai.

We were making our way on-site in a conspicuous police car when Kizashima-senpai asked me this from the passenger seat—with me at the steering wheel. Though I was happy at first to be given the chance to drive (it's a police car! A police car!), it turned out not to be so fun due to Kizashima-senpai constantly making remarks from beside me ("Aren't you turning on your turn signal too late?" or "It's faster if we go this way, you know?").

Unlike Suou-san who liked to change it up every now and then, Kizashima-senpai would consistently address me as "Assistant Inspector Araragi"—since she herself was an inspector, it felt like she was trying to establish the pecking order every time she did that.

I wondered if I really did look like such a cheeky kid to her.

"I'm not as soft as Suou-chan is, after all. I'll be sure to thoroughly toughen you up! Into the next section chief. Or even the chief of police!"

"I don't think I'll be able to make it that far. For someone as halfhearted as me, the path of the elites is far too steep. Plus, there'll be all sorts of traps and pitfalls. I could drop out just like that."

"Did you expect the path of the elites to be some extravagant feast? But don't worry, because if you just drop out, then the Rumors Squad can take you on as an underling."

"I don't exactly have any strong desire to stay in my hometown, though…"

Or rather, I had zero desire.

If there had been any attachment, I wouldn't have gone without visiting for an entire four years.

However, it seemed Kizashima-senpai thought it was the opposite, for she said, "Again with you trying to act all tough. I guess that's how it is for you kids," failing to understand my complexities—also, it seemed Kizashima-senpai had a habit of overly acting like a

senpai, even when it wasn't necessary.

Overly acting like a senpai, or perhaps overly acting like an adult.

Perhaps she was trying to cover for the fact that her outer appearance had stopped aging in middle school.

If that was the case, it wouldn't exactly be mature to try and get in the way of those feelings.

Incidentally, the one officially in charge of me during my training period at the Naoetsu Police Department (in other words, the one who'd gotten stuck with me) was the mermaid Suou Zenka-san, but I had been specifically paired with Kizashima-senpai for the sake of this "phantom slasher" incident.

We had formed a combination.

I'd gone through a tough struggle together with Suou-san on a different case, but Kizashima-senpai was also a graduate of Naoetsu High like me—though we hadn't attended at the same time, Kizashima-senpai wasn't just my senpai as a member of the Naoetsu Police Department, Rumors Squad, but also as a student of Naoetsu High.

I'd gladly let her act like a senpai to me.

And as such, I'd refer to her as Kizashima-senpai with nothing but respect.

To be honest, there had never been anyone in my life I could call senpai until now, so this actually made me pretty happy.

"But it's a little interesting. I thought for sure that I was the only immortal student to attend Naoetsu High since it was founded."

"And that was an incredibly conceited thought to have. Even if they weren't immortal, there were a good number of part-youkai that attended before you, just from what I'm aware of."

"Really…"

There were a good number of them, just from what she was aware of.

With that frequency, it likely meant that oddities weren't as rare as I'd thought—which meant the foundation of the Rumors Squad had been all the more necessary.

"Well, though I've never seen an example as extreme as yours, Assistant Inspector Araragi, doesn't everyone go to school with their own circumstances? I'm sure there's no high school student in this world that spent their youth blissfully, without a single care."

Now that I heard that, that was probably true.

It was so true that I had nothing to say in response.

For example, even Senjougahara Hitagi had been able to complete two of her three years in a state of "having no body weight".

There could have been plenty more of those students that I'd

simply never noticed… Even in that Class 1-3 in my first year that had put me in despair.

Maybe even that person, too.

But, on the other hand.

While my vampire constitution did lend itself to some inconveniences in my daily life, it surely couldn't be comparable to the difficulties one had to face when one's body was a doll made of mud.

What kind of life did Kizashima-senpai lead in high school?

"It wasn't that hard, actually. People are surprisingly not that interested in other people's circumstances—and since Gaen-san was able to figure me out just like that, it meant my disguise hadn't even been perfect, either."

"…And have you met Gaen-san personally?"

"I haven't. She's an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of my grandpa and grandma… or so I remember."

Hmm.

Suou-san had also said that she'd never met Gaen-san personally… I would never have thought so because of her affable personality, but it was possible that that controller wasn't someone you could easily come face-to-face with.

Although, to be honest, I hadn't exactly met her that many times, either—and most of those times were set up through Ononoki-chan, too.

"Ah. Could it be possible that, somewhere within the range of your grandparents' acquaintances' acquaintances' acquaintances' acquaintances, there was a person named Teori Tadatsuru? He was a puppeteer specialist."

"Hm? Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with that name. Who is that?"

"A direct junior of Gaen-san… He was the main creator of a corpse doll that I know."

I had asked on the off chance that she did know, but it seemed no such unusual coincidence had occurred. Although it wasn't particularly unfortunate. Well, Gaen-san's network was pretty large, and Teori Tadatsuru was really an outlier on the level of Oshino Meme or Kaiki Deishuu, so naturally, things wouldn't fall into place so neatly.

"Well, either way, it's thanks to her that I was able to find employment, so I feel a great deal of gratitude towards Gaen-san. These days, it's hard to find work even if you aren't a golem, after all. I won't go into it all, but I put in a lot of effort, okay? Until the Rumors Squad was founded."

"…Were you and the section chief members of the squad since

its foundation?”

“Yes. Right now, the ones left are us two—the other founding members were… killed in the line of duty.”

“Eh!?”

Was this that unforgiving of a squad!?

But when I turned my head in confusion, Kizashima-senpai scolded me by saying, “Keep your eyes on the road!”

With an amused tone.

“I’m just kidding. After starting up the Rumors Squad, they all moved to other regions. They needed to spread the roots that had sprouted, after all. Because the chief wanted a leadership position, and because I loved my hometown, we stayed behind at the Naoetsu Police Department.”

Moved to other regions… Roots that had sprouted… In other words, they went to start up the next “Rumors Squads”.

They’d been steadily doing all this behind-the-scenes work while I had been stressing over my course units in college—or rather, had the behind-the-scenes work already started before I’d even entered Naoetsu High?

If that was the case, it was probably closer to the truth to say that the first Rumors Squad was founded at the Naoetsu Police Department not because it was my hometown, but because it was Kizashima-senpai’s.

Although it’s not like there was only one reason… Good grief.

The world had an underbelly that made me want to start believing in conspiracy theories.

An underbelly, but also a side flank.

In the first place, compared to Hanekawa Tsubasa’s current activities overseas, Gaen-san’s plans were much calmer, though perhaps not as wholesome.

There was no need to worry.

In that respect, you’ve gone past the level of me being able to worry about you, Hanekawa-san.

“What’s wrong, Assistant Inspector Araragi? We’ve almost reached the site. It’s fine to take in the nostalgia, but please be sure to live in the present. For the sake of the future.”

It was like a proverb.

If you ignored the fact that neither I nor Kizashima-senpai had anything like a future.

Because I had commuted to school on bike, I had hardly ever used the path that was the shortest between the station and the school where the “phantom slasher” was said to appear. Strictly speaking, both bicycles that I had owned had gotten destroyed beyond repair in my third year, but after that, I obstinately went to school on foot using the same path that I’d taken on my bicycle, as if I were trying to mourn the losses of both of them.

The paths one takes aren’t changed easily.

As such, I didn’t really recognize the lane that we arrived at.

To the point that it made me wonder, had it really been like this then?

It didn’t exactly have a good view, and it was surrounded by thickets of trees on both sides, so it didn’t seem like a path I would want to take… Was this even a path that Naoetsu High students even took? I couldn’t even see a dog on this path, let alone a single person.

“It can get crowded enough that it becomes hard to breathe when it’s before or after school. Well, I’m just exaggerating, but it did get crowded like that when I was attending.”

It seemed Kizashima-senpai was the kind that took the trains, so she was able to testify as such—though I had no idea why, it seemed she was in a good mood.

“If you have to ask me that, Assistant Inspector Araragi, then the truth is that it seems they’ve become a lot more concerned with safety and public order than they used to be. They’ve put up more streetlights, and they even have convex mirrors set up at road junctions. Ahaha, how many times did I get hit at that corner by bicyclers?”

This wasn’t something I could just pretend to not know anything about.

As a bicycler myself, this was painful news to hear—I’d never hit anyone myself even though I’d been hit before, I couldn’t say that I hadn’t engaged in dangerous bicycle riding like having two people on my bike.

Or rather, I’d done that quite frequently.

It wasn’t really that the world got stricter since then, it was more that I was just a good-for-nothing at the time.

“Fortunately, since I was a mud doll, even if I was hit by a bike, it didn’t hurt or itch or anything. Even if I were to get hit by a plane, it wouldn’t hurt or itch or anything. It was actually harder to pretend that I was injured—I didn’t want to exaggerate the pain, but if I said I was completely unharmed, I would just stand out in a bad

way.”

As she spoke, she pulled out a small flask, then gulped down its contents—though the flask was the kind you’d usually use for alcohol, hers only contained water.

As she was a golem, she normally wouldn’t need food or drink. But, in the exact opposite way as Suou-san, moisture was something that was indispensable to Kizashima-senpai. Especially on sunny days like today.

There was a risk that her skin—that is, her mud—could dry out.

While she was immortal, she wasn’t necessarily indestructible.

“Haaah… Nevertheless, when I still attended, there wasn’t anything like the ‘phantom slasher’. Not even bicycles were considered dangerous—I wonder if, because public order improved, all the smaller issues that went ignored are paradoxically starting to come to light?”

“That could be the case… Like, cautiousness in general went down, or something… And the problems themselves had already been there in the past…”

But if we were talking about the “phantom slasher”, then that probably wasn’t it.

It was hard to believe that high schoolers were having their backs slashed in the past.

At the very least, I’d never experienced something like that—well, I couldn’t exactly say “never”.

For one, I’d gotten the inside of my mouth stapled at one point… Even that would be a huge incident if it happened now.

“Hmm. Assistant Inspector Araragi, what you said does show one point of view, but the way I see it is a little different. It’s not completely true that something like this never happened in the past.”

“Is that so?”

I had thought that Kizashima-senpai’s view was that the “phantom slasher” had never appeared in the past, but was she taking it back? I tilted my head, but she simply continued, “In the past, a phenomenon like this was probably dealt with as ‘*kamaitachi*‘.”

”’*Kamaitachi*‘? Right, I’ve heard about that before.”

“I’d be surprised if a member of the Rumors Squad hadn’t heard of ‘*kamaitachi*‘ before.”

“Ah, yes, well, I am still a newcomer.”

”’*Kamaitachi*‘ are youkai that come in a trio. As the name implies, they’re weasels.[2] And both hands of each one are sickles, like this… The first one knocks you down, the second one cuts you up, and the third one applies medicine to those cuts to heal them—you’ve heard that, right?”

“Mm—”

To tell the truth, I probably hadn’t heard about that before, but I didn’t want my senpai to think I was ignorant, so I gave a vague response without telling the truth—and another reason for that vague response was to incorporate my skeptical feelings of, “What kind of weird youkai is that?”, as well.

“To make cuts and then heal them… What exactly are they trying to accomplish? And is the first weasel, the one that ‘knocks you down’, even really necessary? They’d probably be more successful if they started off by suddenly slashing at you…”

“Those sorts of matter-of-fact criticisms are what spoil these nicer ghost stories—and give birth to more dangerous ones, like the ‘phantom slasher’.”

It’ll be bad if we don’t deal with it while it’s still a rumor, said Kizashima-senpai.

Her scolding made me feel almost like a criminal… even though I was a policeman.

“But trying to eliminate everything that brings about uneasiness is more a modern thing.”

“That’s right. So an incident like this one may have just been ignored in the past. Since it’s only uniforms that were cut, with not a single injury on any student’s skin.”

“They wouldn’t even notice until it was too late.”

“Indeed. You’ve said something smart, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Not everyone is immune to pain the way you and I are.”

Though I wasn’t immune to pain, either…

Maybe it would be good to have a discussion on the minor differences between our types of immortality, bringing in Suou-san as well… It was possible that a wrong assumption could lead to a terrible mistake otherwise.

Anyway, it was time for the inspection.

Kizashima-senpai and I tried walking back and forth, up and down the path, to start with.

But there were no new developments from doing that.

There were no weasels that suddenly burst out of the thickets of trees, and there were no perverts that burst out, either.

“When you say ‘thicket of trees’ too many times, doesn’t it end up sounding like ‘forest of organs’?”[3]

“Please don’t say something so horrifying with such a polite way of speaking.”

“I don’t have any organs, after all. If I could grow a heart or a liver, I’d probably harvest them.”

“That’s taking horrifying to the extreme.”

Surprisingly, our conversation aligned pretty well.

And though it wasn't brought on because of the thicket of trees, I asked, "Could it be possible that it's a natural phenomenon?" as we continued walking. "Don't we also call that '*kamaitachi*'? A whirlwind-like phenomenon where a vacuum forms near your body and cuts you up…"

"True. Or rather, it was more that everyone was satisfied with calling it the work of the *yokai*, '*kamaitachi*', until they tried to scientifically explain it as the vacuum phenomenon through science. Like the theory of geocentrism."

"Geocentrism… That's a little too large-scale to be on the level of a rumor."

"But '*kamaitachi*' themselves are rumors in the wind. Because they are wind, after all. Nevertheless, I think it's hard to see this case as a natural phenomenon—if it were, it would be even more unnatural for only the uniforms to get cut."

That was true.

Actually, since clothes could flutter about, it seemed more likely that only the skin would get cut—plus, the fact that only the backsides of the students were cut bothered me.

I doubted that a natural phenomenon would behave so much like a surprise attack.

"It's possible that the way this lane was constructed made it easy for '*kamaitachi*' rumors to begin—and if that's the case, it would actually be unnatural if no such phenomenon occurred in the past."

"It'd be unnatural, huh."

Then, rather than a natural phenomenon, was it an unnatural phenomenon?

The thing was that it was still hard to judge whether an oddity phenomenon was natural or unnatural.

If anything, it was supernatural.

In the end, with no results to show after three trips up and down the path, we returned to the starting point—though legwork was fundamental to police work, if all we did was walk around without thinking, we'd just get tired.

Although golems never got tired, and vampires could recover from their fatigue in an instant. This was a mental thing.

"Hmm. Is there some sort of misunderstanding that we're making? I'm only saying that because I'm the kind of guy that often makes a lot of misunderstandings…"

"But we've gotten clear evidence of uniforms that had been cut up, you know? And not even just one or two."

"That's right… But Kizashima-senpai, there's something that bothers me. For example, let's say there was some kind of youkai, whether it's a '*kamaitachi*' or a 'phantom slasher', and they were

slashing at high schoolers from behind."

"Swish! Like that."

"Yes, like that. In this example, the youkai wasn't actually seen—but if the clothes they were wearing were cut, is it really possible for them to not notice that? All the victims testified that 'they'd been cut before I knew it', but…"

For example, even if they didn't feel any sharp implements (?) on their bare skin, they'd still feel some sort of wind pressure… The skin of humans usually had fairly sensitive sensory receptors, after all.

"Considering I basically have a natural mud pack with my mud skin, I can't really relate to that. Since I can only really sense temperature and humidity. It's really terrible in midsummer. There was even a time when my arm came off!"

"Did something that brutal really happen?"

"I can't say it was all that brutal. I can just stick it back on again if I moisten the edges. It's a little unclean, but as the saying goes, nothing a little spit can't fix."

So she could at least produce saliva?

I really wanted to ask her about the finer details of her immortality.

"Anyway, going back on topic. Well, in the opposite of my example, if it was midwinter and your back was exposed, then you'd definitely feel a chill, but right now the weather is pretty nice. Maybe people are just making the assumption of safety that 'there's no way my uniform will suddenly get cut', and that's actually having a huge effect."

"That's true…"

What I had was only a theory. I wasn't totally convinced of it myself.

Not to mention, the rumor that I was challenging in this case was exceedingly unrealistic—and the less realistic it was, the less convinced I was. If someone did get slashed at from behind and realize it, they'd probably start panicking out of fear.

It would be impossible to think properly in that state.

"Could you confirm this for me? It wasn't just the victims that didn't see the 'phantom slasher', but all the students around them also didn't see it, right? Did it seem like the uniforms suddenly tore open to the students around them?"

"I don't believe there were any witnesses to that effect. It seems that all the victims were targeted because they were returning home alone."

"Hmm."

Hearing that students returning home alone were targeted, or that care was taken to not be witnessed by anyone, made me think

that it was less likely for it to be an oddity phenomenon and more likely for it to be a human crime—was it possible?

If they stealthily approached so as to not be noticed by the victims, and daringly slashed at the uniform while being careful enough to not cut the skin, and quickly disappeared before the victim turned around—

It wouldn't be hard to hide in the thickets of trees, but the real challenge was still trying to cut the uniform without cutting the skin.

Were such acrobatics possible with any sharp implement?

At the very least, it would be impossible with a sickle.

"…Ah. If it was a demon sword, then maybe…"

"A demon sword? What is that?"

"Well, there was something like that, a while back—it probably still exists now, but since it hasn't been used for several years, it could be all rusted over. It's a huge longsword that the vampire in my shadow once wielded that can cut only oddities."

But that was the opposite.

It would be able to ignore the clothing and cut the body inside, but it wouldn't be able to cut just the clothing itself—unless the clothing itself was an oddity… But an oddity of school uniforms just makes no sense.

"I see. Well, it's not like oddities related to clothing don't exist at all. Incidentally, won't you be calling out that vampire? I've heard that, when you were working with Suou-chan, you enlisted her help—you enlisted the help of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire for an on-site inspection. That is, you left it all to her."

"I didn't leave it all to her, but, well, yes. However, I don't want to have to rely on a young girl all the time. I'm already an adult now, too…"

I gave an arbitrary excuse to dodge the question.

The truth was that Shinobu wasn't particularly happy with how Kizashima-senpai was treating "her master" as an errand boy, so it would actually be difficult to call her out in front of Kizashima-senpai.

And even if I wasn't working with Suou-san, I would be okay with asking for her opinion if I was left alone—but I couldn't exactly say, "My partner hates you, so please go somewhere else."

Though I had to say this was somewhat of an inconvenient arrangement, it was natural that nothing went exactly the way I wanted it to when I housed an oddity within me—or rather, within my shadow.

"Regardless of if it is an oddity phenomenon, if it isn't an oddity phenomenon, and if it's a natural, unnatural, or supernatural phenomenon, if we can't come up with a theory, they'll bring in Crime

Squad 1 or the Public Safety Squad to take over for a full-blown investigation. Since there are victims involved."

"True."

The real problem with the case was if there was even a perpetrator involved.

A nonexistent perpetrator.

That in itself sounded like a rather modern rumor.

And so we spent the entire morning inspecting that school road. (Just as an experiment, Kizashima-senpai and I tried slashing at each other with some sticks to see how it felt. From someone else's point of view, it probably looked like some adults pretending to swordfight for some reason—with the fact that Kizashima-senpai basically looked like a middle schooler, it wouldn't have been surprising for me to be reported. Even though I was a policeman.) After getting lunch (Kizashima-senpai was very senpai-like when she paid for lunch—although the workers were giving me a look as if saying, why are you making a kid like this pay for you?), the two of us decided to visit our dearly missed alma mater.

We'd made an appointment to do so.

That was the power of a public institution—a freelancer like Oshino or a con man like Kaiki wouldn't have been able to enter a school in the middle of the day.

We'd made plans to hear what the affected students had to say (calling it police questioning would be an exaggeration) during lunch break.

Of course, this wasn't as simple as it sounded—it was thanks to the section chief's resources that we managed to make this work so smoothly. And it was for the process to go even smoother that the school's graduates, Kizashima-senpai and me, were dispatched.

So the feeling that it wasn't going smoothly was probably just me.

It felt vaguely difficult to do this.

To be honest, I hadn't expected to come back to my alma mater like this—or rather, I hadn't expected to come back at all.

Though I'd made plans to visit the Kitashirahebi Shrine at least once over my four-month training period, I hadn't especially felt the desire to visit Naoetsu High even once.

I didn't personally have anything to do, and there wasn't anyone that I knew—no, that wasn't true.

Strictly speaking, there was someone I knew at this school, but as for whether or not I wanted to meet her…

"It's fine to be more confident about this, Assistant Inspector Araragi. There are teachers that you learned from that are here, aren't there? Go and brag about how you're a career man now!"

"Why are you phrasing it like a command? I don't want to. I don't want to be seen as conceited for becoming a police officer after having been unable to keep up in school. I don't want them to think that I came to tell them off, or misunderstand that I came to get back

at them…”

“If you actually do have those feelings, then aren’t you just feeling guilty? Don’t worry, nobody really cares about you that much.”

Really?

Well, I did act like I was a problem child, but like how there were plenty of immortal students, I suppose from the school’s perspective, I was just one of many problem children that they had.

I may not even be remembered.

In the end, I’d managed to avoid them, as the teacher that guided us around was someone I didn’t know, and the conversations with the affected students ended without any problems—that was all thanks to Kizashima-senpai’s skill.

Though nowadays I felt a huge barrier in trying to converse with today’s high schoolers, Kizashima-senpai appeared to have no problem with it.

It seemed her childish appearance was surprisingly effective in removing that barrier… Though it wouldn’t have been surprising to develop a complex over it, she was much heartier than that.

I probably wouldn’t be able to make use of my own short height like that.

While Suou-san was an adult that liked kids, Kizashima-senpai’s strong point was her ability to communicate with kids, whether she liked them or not—and because oddities were more likely to get involved with those who were younger, this was most likely an indispensable disposition to have in the Rumors Squad.

At the very least, it was a lot more useful than just being immortal.

As such, although Kizashima-senpai really got into chatting with the victims, she still managed to hear what everyone had to say by the end of the lunch break, not having forgotten her main reason for coming.

She had naturally even managed to obtain everyone’s phone numbers, be they boy or girl.

“This cell phone is my work phone, by the way. I make a very big distinction between work and leisure, so don’t worry, I wasn’t trying to get close to any cute guys here—and I don’t think you’re the sort to mess around with high school girls. Considering your age.”

“Thank you for your concern. But I feel like I’ve gotten even older in the past 30 minutes. It doesn’t feel like I have the energy to speak with high schoolers anymore. Even though in my mind, I’m still a young boy.”

“Well, in terms of my body, I’m still a young girl, after all. So growing older would be nice for a change. But anyway, we didn’t hear

anything new, but at least that means we didn't hear anything that could overturn what we've confirmed so far. That's still a good harvest of information."

I personally couldn't see that as a good harvest… Working really was just an accumulation of wasted effort, wasn't it?

"Well then, shall we head back to the site, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

"Ah… Kizashima-senpai, do you mind going on ahead? There's somewhere I want to visit in that building over there."

I'd been hesitant the whole time I'd been within the school, but once our duties were finished, I finally decided to say that—we hadn't driven the police car here but simply taken the school road, so it wasn't like she needed me to drive her.

But detectives really had good intuition.

"Didn't you want to leave as soon as possible before? You said you had no good memories of this place, didn't you?"

"I didn't go that far… I do have some good memories. Well, you're right that I do want to leave, but seeing as I'm already here, there's someone that I should probably see before I go. It'll be scary if I don't."

"Hmm? …Is it something personal?"

"Yes, it's personal. But there's a possibility that we could get some information to help the investigation—because she's a mystery maniac."

Or rather, she herself was wrapped in mystery.

As mysterious as the darkness.

I then parted ways with Kizashima-senpai, who had said that if that was the case then she had somewhere she wanted to visit, too, so I could do as I liked—to no one's surprise, she herself had some "secret location" within Naoetsu High as well.

No matter how open this workplace was, I probably wouldn't get the chance to hear how an immortal golem like her spent her youth in this school—but as for me, my "secret location" was the classroom for Class 1-3.

However, there was no such Class 1-3, so it was a nonexistent Class 1-3.

"Hey—Araragi-senpai. I thought you'd forgotten about me."

Sitting at the teacher's desk in this empty classroom was none other than Oshino Ougi—though she was supposed to have been a first year that transferred to Naoetsu High when I was in my third year, she still wore a Naoetsu High uniform and still wore a dubious smile on her face.

Ever since then, Ougi-chan had been a high school student the whole time…

After she had gotten separated from me, I heard she'd gotten close with Kanbaru, but after Kanbaru graduated as well, it seemed she'd ended up becoming fixed in the school itself.

Did she even exist, or did she not exist?

As Oshino Meme's niece, it seemed she'd taken up the occupation of getting students who'd lost their way in Naoetsu High and making them even further lost—quite literally becoming a school ghost story, as one of the seven wonders.

Because her starting point had been me, not even Kizashima-senpai was aware of Ougi-chan, but even if the Rumors Squad tried to get ahold of this classroom's existence (or nonexistence), it would probably be impossible for them.

Though she couldn't be considered harmless, Ougi-chan had become a symbol of the school, and there was probably no specialist that could do anything about that—since even Gaen-san had said so, that was the extent of how untouchable she was.

In the end, even I had simply left her alone once I had graduated from high school, but she experienced some utterly nonsensical growth since then—her appearance was still that of a fifteen-year-old, but in spite of that, she had taken on a dramatic evolution. It had gone to the point that it was almost irreparable.

If I were to confess my crime (even though I was a policeman), then this was one of the reasons why I didn't visit my hometown, but

seeing that I was her manufacturer of sorts, I probably couldn't go without visiting her anymore.

"…What are you reading, Ougi-chan? A mystery? A locked-room one?"

"No, no. It's not even prose, you see. Recently, I've started reading a lot of manga," said Ougi-chan, showing me the cover.

Oof. I felt like I'd just been hit.

As if she had been lying in wait for me to come see her, the author was none other than—"Sengoku Nadeko".

"But apparently you don't read the kanji as 'Nadeko' but 'Nadeshiko'. It's her pen name. I'd always thought her name was rather strange, but it looks like she herself was worrying about it, too."

"…Is it her third work since her debut? That's pretty amazing," I started, with a harmless, inoffensive comment.

"Though it doesn't seem like it's selling very well," shot back Ougi with a harmful, offensive comment.

That was the type of girl she was.

"However, it has a bit of a cult following. Since it's cute but dark. Ah, though I say dark, I haven't been meddling in her affairs at all—that darkness is the darkness of Sengoku-chan herself."

Though I do like this work, said Ougi-chan, setting the book aside.

Seeing how she handled it gently, it seemed she wasn't lying.

"Don't worry. After Sengoku-chan graduated from middle school, she moved away from this town. So you don't need to be concerned about her suddenly running into you on the street and reviving her lovey-dovey romantic feelings for you, Araragi-senpai."

"I hadn't really been concerned about that in the first place…"

Or had I? I didn't even know.

I hadn't even known back then, either.

"Isn't she tied to Gaen-san, now? I thought I heard something like that… No, not Gaen-san. Was it Ononoki-chan…"

"That's right. Just like you, Araragi-senpai, or rather, Assistant Inspector Araragi—Gaen-san is making good use of her as a mangaka. Gaen-san's project aims to steadily set things up even on the entertainment side of things, too."

"As always, Ougi-chan, you really know everything, don't you?"

"I don't know anything. You're the one who knows—Assistant Inspector Araragi," said Ougi-chan, looking at me with those pitch-black eyes of hers.

…That was it, wasn't it?

"But stop calling me 'Assistant Inspector', Ougi-chan. You've

always called me ‘senpai’, after all.”

“That’s Kanbaru-senpai’s duty, but if that’s what you wish, then I shall do as you please. But aren’t you making a triumphant return to this high school after having become a detective in the Rumors Squad, Araragi-senpai? If you just wanted to hear about the present state of Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei, you could just look in the table of contents of the magazine she’s serialized in. But if you’re here for advice, then I’m all ears.”

“Well, it’s not exactly advice, but…”

I’d come to this illusory Class 1-3 because I couldn’t just leave after coming this far without meeting Ougi-chan, and since I’d said as much to Kizashima-senpai, I had to open up about the secrets of my investigation.

To open up to a mystery maniac about the secrets of my investigation was itself a rather mysterious development.

Although it was hard to keep secrets from Ougi-chan in the first place.

“Ah, yes. I myself have been truly grieving over the ‘phantom slasher’ incidents taking place on the school road to Naoetsu High. It seems that even the students I’m currently meddling with have taken some damage from slashing, as well.”

…It seemed that among the kids that we’d spoken to earlier, some of them had fallen prey to Ougi-chan.

They were taking damage beyond what they’d received from the “phantom slasher” or the “kamaitachi”, but there was nothing I could do about that… In the end, after getting involved with Ougi-chan, they could only do something about it themselves.

Just as I, Kanbaru, and Sengoku had done.

“So it’s not your doing, then. Right, Ougi-chan?”

“Oh my, are you doubting my words? Ha ha. You have no faith in me at all.”

It wasn’t really something to laugh about, since I’d certainly had my concerns—as long as Naoetsu High’s students were victims. Although, suddenly slashing at innocent high schoolers from behind wasn’t exactly something that Ougi-chan would do.

“Innocent high schoolers, huh? But do they really exist?”

“Huh? What? What do you mean by that?”

“No, no, there’s a very deep meaning to that.”

“Is there?”

“It’s regrettable that I would fall under false suspicion by my beloved Araragi-senpai, but I shall offer up a modest hint. Being useful to you, Araragi-senpai, is my purpose in life, after all—or rather, it *was* my purpose in life.”

When she switched to past tense, it made me keenly aware.

Of the fact that Ougi-chan was no longer bound to me—despite going by the name Oshino Ougi, she didn't even hold the position of Oshino Meme's niece anymore.

The darkness grows up, and the darkness leaves the nest.

In that sense, you could say she'd gone far past Oshino Shinobu, who still inhabited my shadow.

She wasn't stagnating—unlike me, although I'd been the one to bring her into this world.

"A hint? You can't just give me the answer?"

"Do you really see me as a junior that's that kind?"

"You're so unkind it's almost astonishing."

"Then that astonishment is your answer. However, I am a mirror to you, Araragi-senpai. You're not exactly a capable junior yourself, are you?"

"Well, yes."

"Anyway, the hint."

Why did the "phantom slasher" only target the backs of students as they were coming back from school, started Ougi-chan.

And I was the one who continued.

"*—When they could just as easily do so as they were going to school?*"

"Hmm. Well, that does seem right. Since a school road is used both to go to and to come back from school—it's a little strange that the attacks are only focused on those coming back."

That's a pretty clever school friend you have there, said Kizashima-senpai once we met back up on-site.

She wasn't even a school friend of mine, and the hint wasn't really something I could use, even if I heard it—so the way it made the mystery even more mysterious was very Ougi-chan-like.

Without prying further into the affairs of my "school friend", Kizashima-senpai said, "As for me, I visited the staff room."

So Kizashima-senpai's "secret location" was the staff room?

It wasn't exactly a place I could accompany her to.

I was ashamed of my bad behavior in those olden days.

"Yes. Although I went in there without making an appointment. It was just a decision I made on the spot. I had fun chatting with some of my old teachers. They were saying, 'You haven't changed a bit, have you?' But that's a matter of course for me."

"…I'm just asking out of curiosity, but Kizashima-senpai, what do you plan on doing in the future? You wouldn't possibly keep walking around with a baby face at eighty years old, right?"

"That's a rather indelicate question."

She turned it around by saying that I would encounter the same problem, but strictly speaking, my immortality didn't necessarily mean eternal youth and longevity, so I couldn't avoid changing over the years, in both a good way and a bad way.

But it was different for mud dolls.

Even clay figures managed to stay exactly the same for thousands of years, right?

"Well, in that case, I'll have to deceive them with makeup. It'll be the opposite of makeup usually being used to make people look younger… I'll have to put wrinkles on my skin and such."

"Would it not be possible to get Gaen-san's help with making a new doll to move your soul into?"

"With that Teori-san or some such person? It would be great if that was possible. But what my grandpa and grandma used to keep my soul in this world was mostly a forbidden spell, you see."

"Forbidden spell?"

"I'm not talking about a tree made of gold.[4] A spell that's forbidden—a very powerful one, though not very practical to use. Well, someone may be able to reverse-engineer it after a few decades, so I can wait until then. Fortunately, I am immortal, after all."

It almost sounded like she was a patient with some incurable disease just hoping for a new treatment to be discovered, but, well, in the first place Kizashima-senpai had actually died at a young age from a serious illness, and the mindset itself was rather alike.

My questions went a little too far. Let's get back on track.

"So, Kizashima-senpai, did you find out anything new from the staff room?"

"I didn't make any progress. Instead of trying to figure out the truth behind the 'phantom slasher' incident, I noticed that they seemed more concerned about trying to cover up such disturbances—since it is a private school, I can only guess at their true motives, but they're stepping back from solving the problem."

"That approach that Naoetsu High takes is still the same as it was back then."

Although I couldn't exactly criticize them for it, since it worked out well for me a number of times… How many times had I gone around in the school at night?

I'd forgotten about the time I snuck onto the roof, too.

But it was true that such an insular environment was what led to students becoming truant. It wasn't a problem that could easily be resolved, but I hoped that they'd do something about it someday.

"Indeed. But anyway, for the time being, what we must do is resolve the problem that's at our hands now—at this point, all we can do is try to catch the criminal red-handed and arrest them."

We can't arrest oddities, but if there are any "*kamaitachi*", we'll grab them by their tails—said Kizashima-senpai.

"And just in time, it's almost time for students to start coming back from school. We'll stand guard here and try to witness the moment that any students' backs get cut—if there were no witnesses, we'll be the witnesses ourselves."

It was a rather proactive attitude.

Although, I was a little reluctant to just stand by and watch while kids were slashed at—it felt almost like a decoy operation. It may be a bit naive to say this, but I wanted to stop crimes before they occurred, if I could.

"I feel the same way, but in reality, none of the victims have even a scratch on them. Of course, they'll need to pay for their uniforms, but none of the high schoolers are at risk here."

Mm, was all I said in response.

That was true, but the one-in-a-million chance still made me hesitant. A stakeout operation was a very police-like thing to do, but to just stand by and watch high schoolers get attacked…

"Please get a grip. Because even 'just standing by and watching' is harder than it sounds."

Kizashima-senpai clapped her hands together loudly as if to encourage me.

"Unlike the case of the river that Suou-san was in charge of, this case has a high probability of the observer effect taking place. No matter how cleverly we try to hide in those thickets of trees, the 'phantom slasher' may not appear simply because it senses our gazes."

The observer effect.

It was something like, the act of observing a phenomenon itself will end up influencing that phenomenon… It was logic that was applied to things like verifying the existence of ESP.

Like, if you take an antagonistic approach and try to see through its tricks, then fortune-telling will end up not working… Though it wasn't exactly the same as saying, "true believers will be saved", it was a rather convenient excuse for occult-types, having some amount of truth to it.

Instead of a new treatment, this was an old medicine that had seen many days.

That is, the placebo effect.

"Yes. Although in our case, we don't exactly doubt the existence of oddities—but on the other hand, if 'not being witnessed' is the condition for the 'phantom slasher' appearing, it does manage to account for why the victims only had their backs slashed at."

"It does, doesn't it?"

It wasn't just an oddity phenomenon with no witnesses, but an oddity phenomenon that occurred precisely because there were no witnesses… In that case, a stakeout operation could be counterproductive, in a manner of speaking.

Although, if us being on the lookout put a stop to the 'phantom slasher' incident, I guess that could be called productive?

"Don't be stupid. It's not like we can stand guard around this school road forever. The duty of the Rumors Squad is to nitpick these rumors. What would be the point of keeping a single nit alive?"

I thought the expression of "keeping a nit" should be patented, but it was as she said.

It was a bad habit of mine to only be able to see what was in front of me.

What I should be focusing on was, in this case, the backs of people and the background scenery.

"Then, what should we do? If we want to stand guard without getting noticed, the trees seem like the only option to hide in…"

But if that was the only blind spot, then I would think that anyone would be more conscious about checking there.

In the first place, if they were going to enter our line of sight, we'd appear in their line of sight as well.

If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

Was it something like that?

"If there are no blind spots, we can just make one. Aren't we experts on death, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

It seemed that Kizashima-senpai was fond of thinking along the lines of, "If there's no such-and-such, then we'll become such-and-such" or "If there's no such-and-such, then we'll make such-and-such". It was an element you wouldn't find in my personality no matter how hard you looked. A positive creative energy.

Or would that just be, "If there's no creative energy, we can just get creative energy" as well?

"If we don't use our immortal powers now, when would we use them, Assistant Inspector Araragi?"

"If I had a choice, I wouldn't ever want to use my immortal powers, though… But what exactly do you mean, Kizashima-senpai?"

I had no idea how being experts on death led to not becoming witnesses to the "phantom slasher".

What the heck was this golem trying to get at?

"You're rather slow on the uptake. Like I said—well, let's see. Assistant Inspector Araragi, please go and use that convex mirror over there."

"Sorry?"

"I'm saying, go to a different place and use that mirror to keep an eye on the school road. You at least have the exceptional eyesight of a vampire, don't you?"

Ah—that's what she meant.

It wasn't exactly simple to be on the lookout through a mirror, but thanks to the aftereffects of vampirism lingering in my body, it was possible for me with my long-range vision.

Moreover, using a mirror to see oddities that couldn't, or shouldn't, be seen was rather like a tradition from mythology.

For a famous example, the legend of Medusa.

Or was that using a mirror to exterminate her?

In any case, it was possible that Ougi-chan was ostentatiously reading the manga of Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei as foreshadowing for this moment—or no, that was just to drop some snide remarks.

Ougi-chan loved to offend people, after all.

"Right. And vampires aren't reflected in mirrors, after all. Even if you can see them from here, they won't be able to see you from where they are."

Though Kizashima-senpai laid out the plan with a triumphant face, that was something I had no choice to point out the flaw in.

"I'm very sorry, but unfortunately, I'm the type of vampire that does get reflected in mirrors…"

“What did you say!? Well, please give it your all and figure something out.”

Was it something I could do something about just by giving it my all?

It had been a huge problem in the past when I’d stopped showing up in mirrors… To think that, five years later, I’d be trying to make an effort to stop showing up in mirrors.

But if I could manage that, then it could get me a lot of sway, not just during this case, but for the rest of the training period as well —using my vampire powers wantonly was not something to be praised (considering I’d gone through a lot of hardships because of it), but as far as the Rumors Squad was concerned, that shouldn’t be a restriction.

Of course, that was if they had any restrictions at all.

“Since it’s an order from my superior, I’ll do the best that I can… But what will you be doing, Kizashima-senpai? I’m sure there was some special trait that golems had that gave them an advantage in standing guard…”

Because of my poor study skills, I wasn’t too familiar with the subject.

I’d heard something along the lines of golems having certain characters inscribed on them, and that inscription was their only weak point, or something… But I couldn’t think of any special traits otherwise.

And to that, Kizashima-senpai glanced back at me and said, “The special trait that golems have, Assistant Inspector Araragi, is that, at the end of the day, their entire body is made of ‘dirt’. And nothing more.”

And, once again, she took out her small flask.

If I had to start from the conclusion, we attained no results from standing guard.

Even though, from halfway up a mountain that was a few hundred meters away, I'd opened my eyes wide and observed the convex mirror (though I'd put in some fighting spirit, I couldn't tell if I did or didn't show up in the mirror, but I felt that this wasn't something you could do with just your all), while Kizashima-senpai had covered herself in dirt and kept watch all the way until evening.

Or, rather than covering herself in dirt.

She'd transformed her entire body to dirt—and kept watch like that.

It was that *doton-no-jutsu* that ninjas used—or not, because Kizashima-senpai had poured her flask of water over her head and muddied up her mud body.

It was the exact opposite approach to water that the mermaid Suou-san had, but in a sense, you could say it was exactly the same.

Her body, that could dry up and crack without moisture—while that body of "dirt" did, in fact, require a supply of water (and you could even repair broken parts with it—making her immortal), an excess supply would actually make it harder to maintain her shape.

She'd become muddy.

"But it won't end up releasing my soul. It wouldn't do that even if my body turned into something like a swamp—so I won't be hiding in the trees. I'll be right below them, covered in dirt."

I'll just be down in the dumps—said Kizashima-senpai with an innocent look.

An innocent look of course came naturally for a golem, but I couldn't keep from getting nauseous at the thought of going that far for my work—it wasn't even turning her body into dust, but into mud.

Far from the trees themselves, she would scatter pieces of "herself" all across the school road.

In short, she would be stepped on by all the high schoolers returning home from school.

She'd be trampled underfoot by the kids she was aiming to protect.

I had felt that I was being naive in being reluctant to do a stakeout because it felt too much like a decoy operation, but, far from none of the students being at risk, the one who was at the most risk was Kizashima-senpai herself.

What a mess.

It may be just a matter of course for her, but it being a matter

of course was a mess in itself—whether or not she'd be able to return to her original form would be a matter of luck every time she tried it, and even if she didn't feel pain, I highly doubted that losing a human form didn't cause pain to one's soul.

To be stepped on by the very ones you're trying to protect.

It had to be painful.

"I don't understand, Kizashima-senpai, why you have to go that far—I'll keep a proper lookout, so let's just leave it at that."

"There are no absolutes when it comes to rumors. Therefore, if we don't do the best that we can, we cannot say with confidence that we thoroughly 'nitpicked' at everything—I don't want you to have the wrong idea, Assistant Inspector Araragi, because it's not that I don't have faith in your eyes."

"But—excuse me, but I don't want you to have the wrong idea, either. It's not that I don't have faith in you. In fact, I feel like I should learn from you that consciousness you have for your work. I feel it from the bottom of my heart. But there are limits we just shouldn't cross!"

Of course, considering this 'junior's rebellion', what came to mind was my classmate from high school, Hanekawa Tsubasa—I realized now, as the years passed since that spring break, how much harder it was to recover from what she did for me back then.

After that, after the nightmare had passed, her way of living had changed.

Hanekawa was no longer the Hanekawa she was back then.

After our paths diverged, I no longer had any way to stop Hanekawa.

And because of that, when I saw anyone that reminded me even a little bit of Hanekawa, I wanted to try and stop them, whoever it was—and Kizashima-senpai didn't just remind me of her "a little bit".

In a sense, she was throwing herself at the problem even more than Hanekawa was.

Thinking about it now, even Suou-san had that same inclination…

"It's important to us that the world remains connected, and I'm sure you feel the same way, Assistant Inspector Araragi. Gaen-san, and even the section chief, are making good use of that—doesn't it make you feel the greatest when you see that you take that profile you've had to cover up and use it for the sake of justice and helping people?"

And please don't ask me what justice actually means, said Kizashima-senpai, forcibly ending the argument and moving straight into preparations for the stakeout… More specifically, taking off her jacket. And then taking off the rest, even her shoes.

Ah, that was right.

It seemed that I had once again been hit with the fate of seeing a girl half-naked after just barely getting to know them. It almost felt like I needed to settle some dispute or karma would come back to bite me someday—but anyway, it seemed Kizashima-senpai couldn't stand the thought of getting her brand-name jacket or silk stockings or custom-made loafers dirty, even if she was going to cover herself in dirt.

It seemed she'd firmly drawn the line between work and leisure there.

Well, even if I was used to suddenly being stripped at, if she'd drawn the line there, I had no choice but to restrain myself from trying to stop her.

All I could do was watch over the convex mirror from a far away place with the same seriousness that she had.

And, at the same time, make sure she stayed safe after turning into a thin layer of dirt and spreading all over the school road like a carpet (although in that form, safety meant nothing), whether I liked it or not.

Every time a high schooler walked by, even as I wondered whether or not they'd get slashed at, I couldn't help but watch their feet instead, and I spent the whole time in that feeling of unease when I heard, "I've changed my mind about her, just a little," from my shadow.

It seemed Shinobu was pleased with the golem's method of investigation—although it wasn't to the point that she would give us any suggestions, unfortunately.

She must not have liked the fact that I was obediently doing as I was told.

What an incredibly loyal manservant I was.

And with that, we disappointingly ended up with no results—we couldn't catch the "phantom slasher" red-handed, and no phenomena that even resembled it occurred. After the returning-home period, it had turned completely dark, and the school road had become completely deserted.

I hurried back to the site and asked the ground, "Are you okay, Kizashima-senpai?"

"I'm fine. There are no problems here. Sorry to have to ask you this, but would you mind filling up the flask I gave you and putting my parts back together, Assistant Inspector Araragi? It's fine if you just do it roughly. I'm sure you'd never expected to be playing with mud at this age, but this is work, too."

Was this really work, though?

Even though I thought that, when I did as I was told without

any objections, the mud soon began to sloppily come back together on its own into its original form, as if it were some sort of shape-memory alloy.

"I'm confident that my stakeout wasn't noticed… I can assert that with absolute confidence. But I didn't catch a glimpse of anything youkai-like. If that's the case, then that means it may not be an oddity phenomenon after all."

How was she even speaking? Was the dirt just vibrating to produce sound like speakers did? But even in that condition where she was still just a pile of dirt, Kizashima-senpai made her analysis.

"I had the same impression. However, if that's the case, the culprit… How did a real 'phantom slasher' even slash at the backs of high schoolers without being noticed by anyone?"

Was it really an expert?

In that case, the situation really called for neither me nor Kizashima-senpai but Mitome-san to appear… Hm? No, wait. That wasn't it. What we should be doubting wasn't that.

The question wasn't, how did they do it without being noticed.

That would be a culprit's point of view. Or the point of view of those standing guard.

If it was really an oddity phenomenon, in the end, anything was possible—putting aside the idea of a demon sword, even Shinobu in her prime could cut off the heads of anyone without being noticed, not just uniforms.

So the question wasn't how.

It was—why did they notice?

The affected high schoolers didn't notice when they were being slashed at, but why did they notice afterwards? Since, far from it being midwinter, the weather was quite nice—what caused them to notice?

It's on your back, after all? Would you even be able to notice?

Would you notice at any point in time except when you were slashed at?

Not even I could look at my own back, even with a vampire's vision.

Did someone around them tell them about it? No, all the victims were going home alone. Then…

"All right. I've more or less taken shape now. Assistant Inspector Araragi, if you would return my clothes."

"Ah, right. Here you go."

Even if the form had come together, her outer surface was still mud, so it was almost like a prototype figurine.

It didn't have the grossness of a vampire's regeneration, but it did still give off a rather unrefined impression—but of course, because

figurines had no bones. After taking the clothes in her awkwardly moving arms, she trudged over to the convex mirror.

Luckily, golems did get reflected in mirrors—and since two convex mirrors were set up to face each other, it was easy to see the back of your head, too…

Mirrors set up to face each other?

—Then that astonishment is your answer.

—I am a mirror to you, Araragi-senpai.

"…And you really are an exemplary junior,[5] Ougi-chan," I whispered.

Because, Ougi-chan had nimbly given me all the answers.

Turning that around, it meant that to her, I was no longer someone she needed to seriously ridicule, making that further evidence of our separation—but that was the way she ought to be.

Mirrors facing each other—opposite mirrors.

If they let you see the back of your head—of course they'd let you see your back, too.

Right.

For that fact, "I was the one who knew".

"Kizashima-senpai, do you have a moment?"

I called out to Kizashima-senpai who was still in the middle of setting herself. Following Ougi-chan's example.

"It sounds truly foolish when I put it like this, but—"

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line for this case.

It was truly foolish. It had certainly been a blind spot; nevertheless, even if I ended up solving a puzzle for the first time in my life, I couldn't celebrate just yet.

In the end, the school road was not the site of the incident, only the site where the incident was discovered—it wasn't where the victims received damage, but where they noticed it.

By looking in the mirror.

By looking in those mirrors that faced one another.

By looking at their own backs. —All they did was notice.

Knowing that, the rest of the puzzle fell right into place.

If this wasn't actually the site of the incident, then where exactly did the victims' uniforms get cut? If students on their way to school had become victims as well, then it would've been hard to pin down, but if the victims were only limited to students coming back from school, then the answer was obvious—the site of the incident was the school.

It was Naoetsu High.

Yes, a "phantom slasher" had appeared in that insular environment—which made it even easier to narrow down the possible suspects. If the scene of the crime was a place that couldn't easily be entered, not even by the police unless they followed the proper procedures, then the culprit had to be among those that were inside.

They weren't even trying to make it seem like the work of an oddity.

It would be easy to slash at someone's uniform without them noticing or even getting hurt, if that person wasn't necessarily walking home from school—because in school, students had gym class.

And, though I'd never taken part in any, there were also club activities.

If the uniform wasn't being worn, then even without a demon sword, anyone could easily cut it with a box cutter, scissors, or, with some difficulty, even nail clippers.

"In other words, is it just a prank among students? One that just ended up getting blown up into this big issue? When I was in high school, there were pranks like sticking a piece of paper with 'KICK

ME' written on it on someone's back, but is it like that?"

"…Kizashima-senpai, did you go to an American high school or something?"

"I went to Naoetsu High."

"Ah, that's right."

Well, "KICK ME" signs could be the same, but cutting up uniforms wasn't something that ended as just a prank—even if it didn't involve any "phantom slasher", it was already a big issue. And, if you included the fact that all the victims were the type that would walk home alone, it ended up coming together into something very unpleasant.

Not just a prank, but harassment. And it wasn't just harassment, it was almost bullying.

From the impressions I got of the victims when Kizashima-senpai had talked to them, it didn't seem that they particularly thought that something that terrible had been done to them, so it barely fell one step short of bullying, maybe…

Ougi-chan had said she was "currently meddling with" some of them.

Which meant that they were those kinds of kids.

Kids that seemed like they would be swallowed up by the darkness—it was possible that Ougi-chan was "meddling" with not just "some" of them, but all of them.

Perhaps she, like some sort of guardian deity for the school—or perhaps like some sort of guardian angel for students that had lost their way—had stopped the crimes before they could succeed.

And yes, it only turned into this "phantom slasher" rumor because of the cases that came to light, but realistically, there were probably victims that didn't notice the damage until they got home and just meekly accepted it.

It wasn't a matter of escalating the problem. The problem had already escalated.

The situation was already critical—there was really no more room to aggravate it further.

Knitting her eyebrows together and twisting her childish face into a frown, Kizashima-senpai said, "In that case, we'll have to pick that nit out without letting any of the victims know the truth… If we give an official notice to the teachers, we should be able to prevent any more damage from occurring."

Yes, I agreed.

A cover-up like this was right up my alley. We'd wrap this up by rounding up the perpetrator without letting the victims know—though I didn't think that was the best way to do things, we'd have to be fine with doing so if we wanted to settle things before the situation

went from “one step short of bullying” to *actual* bullying. Depending on how you saw it, it was a little unfair to protect the victims by pretending that there was no perpetrator, but that was the job of the Rumors Squad.

A nonexistent perpetrator.

To pretend that there was no ghost story, and that there was no incident.

Not shaking off the problem—but letting the wind blow it away.

But, even so…

“For a school with such a strained atmosphere, it’s a rather serious rumor. It seems I was the one that got caught up in the nostalgia, Assistant Inspector Araragi. My apologies.”

After finally drying up and shaping her hair back in place, Kizashima-senpai bowed deeply towards me. Rather than an apology, it seemed more like a confession.

“Because of my school pride, I ended up remembering only the good parts. But that’s right, school is a very stressful place. Even if I passed off ‘KICK ME’ signs as a joke, my high school life hadn’t always been good—my memories of school aren’t all good.”

“…But I’m sure you definitely did have good memories, and a fun youth, as well.”

I was sure she did.

It surely shined brightly, no matter how muddied it got.

Mitome Wolf

001

Saisaki Mitome was the descendent of a werewolf. In general, there's a sense of familiarity that comes with using the term "wolfman" instead of "werewolf", but since she was female, I suppose it should be "wolfwoman" instead. But anyway, she was a wolf while she was human, and she was human even when she was a wolf—unlike how I became a vampire, or how Suou Zenka became a mermaid, or how Kizashima Nozomi became a golem, instead of becoming a monster partway through her life, she had been instilled with a wolfish nature from birth, or perhaps from even before she was born.

Though I didn't really have an understanding of the girl herself, other than her rough personality, it seemed she'd come from such a family… Her parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins all, more or less, had the same constitution—a constitution where, on the night of a full moon, they'd transform from humans to wolves.

It seemed that the wolf genes in Saisaki Mitome were particularly strong even among her family members, so even if she didn't bathe in the light of the moon, she was still capable of transforming if she looked at any similar-looking round object—and to the opposite effect, even on a night with a supermoon, she was capable of restraining her wolf transformation.

Her constitution was completely under her control.

"If y'ask me, though, the feeling of 'not transforming' is what makes no sense. Since I've been living like this for thirty years."

In the first place, if you ignored the unexpected point that she could "turn into a wolf", Saisaki Mitome was mostly just a normal person—a normal person with slightly more power than a human, slightly faster legs than a human, a slightly better nose than a human, and slightly more fondness for fresh meat than a human.

For a girl like her, choosing the path of a police officer was extremely natural.

She simply believed that that was the best way to use her abilities to maximize her contribution to society—although, at the moment she had made that resolve, the idea of the Rumors Squad hadn't even sprouted in the mind of Gaen-san yet.

So the path that she tried to walk was the path of what was technically still a proper police officer.

"I wanted to become a police dog. Since they're cool. And the days where a wolf can live as a wolf are over now."

I'm the Last Wolf now, she said, not out of self-deprecation but almost out of pride—actually, her time as a police officer was

something to boast of, with many commendations given for her services.

With her physical capabilities easily exceeding those of a brawny guy even in spite of her supple body, she was brought into special forces as soon as she was sworn in—and when she had been my age, she had already been put in charge of an entire unit, carrying out large-scale criminal investigations and nationwide disaster relief efforts.

Gaen-san was also crazy for headhunting a hero like that… But from Gaen-san's perspective, a member like Saisaki Mitome was indispensable for the Rumors Squad.

When I heard that, I had interpreted it as, "Aha, so basically that means we needed combat-ready personnel"—because even if they were on the level of rumors, the oddities we'd go up against weren't guaranteed to be defenseless.

At the very least, we'd need to be able to protect ourselves.

However, this was just me jumping to conclusions.

What Gaen-san actually wanted was not the werewolf's physical state, but the werewolf's mental state.

Though you wouldn't expect it from someone with a rough personality like hers, she had the steely resolve that made her unconditionally execute the orders that were given to her. And Gaen-san wanted to use that as an example.

She wanted the way of life of the "Last Wolf" to influence the team that had been entrusted with her secret—to take the strong wills of the declining werewolves and have them flourish out in the world.

And the wolf that had obtained this sponsor…

Was currently encircling a cat.

002

That day, every public institution throughout Japan had become restless. Because *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa was returning for the first time in three years—so any and every organization was going through any and every policy in place to try and stop the flight she was on. But resistance was futile, for all those plans were smashed to pieces. The government had persisted to the very end, but, upon learning that her goal was to erase all traces of herself from the country, they reluctantly gave up. Even if that meant risking a change in the peace level of the country, they had opted for the chance to wipe away the shame of her country of origin being this pacifist country.

Naturally, the Naoetsu Police Department that I was training at was moving at a whirlwind pace as well. Or rather, it was a full-on storm—because the jurisdiction of this department was where Hanekawa Tsubasa had spent most of her teenage years.

Nevertheless, because the Rumors Squad was in charge of not storms but rumors in the wind, we'd been left out of the loop from that uproar—with the exception of one police dog, or the self-styled "canine policewoman".

"Koyomi-kun, Koyomi-kun. Tell me everything you know 'bout Hanekawa Tsubasa. Since they put me in charge of escortin' her."

She had just stopped me from going out to nip another rumor in the bud with Suou-san—incidentally, her way of closing the distance to people was rather unique, so she called me "Koyomi-kun" from our very first meeting. And she coerced me into calling her "Mitome-san" with her intense senpai pressure.

Suou-san tactfully read the mood and said, "'Kay, Araragi-kun, I'll meet you there," quickly going on ahead—although if she were really being tactful, I would've wanted her to say something like "Sorry, but he's my partner," and forcibly take me along with her. But, considering a mermaid to a wolf was like paper to scissors, it was probably unreasonable to have such expectations for her. The reality was that, for a bundle of deliciousness like Suou-san, the only coworker she could safely associate with was Kizashima-senpai, the golem who did not need to eat to live. Though it did give her the drawback of seeming "wishy-washy", it was better than being preyed upon.

Along those lines, even I had no chance of disobeying Mitome-san.

There was the simple instinctual fear I had of wolves, but I did also feel that I wanted to go beyond the limits of my squad to help out

with Mitome-san's escort duties using my past experience—not to mention, the fact that Mitome-san's escort was someone I owed a great debt to from my high school days.

"However, all I know about her is really the old Hanekawa… Basically, her past profile that she's coming here to erase. I don't want it to become pointless information that could distract you."

"There's no such thing as pointless information. I'm here because I wanna learn everything I can, even stuff that might be distractin' or incorrect, so that I can deal with every possibility. So it'll be better if you cooperate, all right?"

It almost sounded like a threat, but her airtight attitude was actually reassuring.

"What I need to protect isn't Hanekawa Tsubasa. And I'm not exaggeratin' here, but I'm protectin' this country, or maybe even the whole world. So I wanna do it perfectly. And why are we just standin' around, Koyomi-kun? Let's go to a cafe. I'll buy you something to drink."

It was a suspicious senpai act.

By the time I entered the third month of my training period, I'd managed to figure out my senpai's methods of pampering (in a worldly sense, it would be called "extortion")… But oh well.

"Mitome-san, don't tell me you've been put in command of the escort group?"

"Course not, course not. I'm just an underling of an underling of an underling. I'm like the end of a cigarette butt that was thrown off in the corner. Since they already decided on the frontline ages ago… But it's because of that that I can hear from you younger folks. Even this old wolf has a role to play."

Even though you're not that far off in years, old wolf.

Unless she's counting in dog years.

"But y'see, my family has somehow gotten involved in the escort preparations, too, and I have orders from them. There's one from the riot police, of course, but they managed to bring in someone from outside the National Police Agency through extra-legal measures… It's crazy, isn't it? Maybe they'll even bring the JSDF in!"

"…Those are some extravagant preparations for a single girl coming back to her home country."

"Well, it'd be great if we were just making a big fuss over just one rat."

Although it wasn't one rat but one cat.

But that cat, in the sense that she was quite capable of shaking up the values of today's society, could probably be considered to be on the same level as Schrodinger's cat among influential cats—it wasn't the time to be worried about the territoriality of such organizations.

Territoriality.

It was to get rid of territoriality that was Hanekawa's great cause now, and the way this nation was coming together right now ironically could be considered dancing upon the palm of her hand—or, because she was a cat, her paw.

"But it's the first I'm hearing of it, Mitome-san. That your family members are in all sorts of places."

"Didja think the werewolves would just be hiding up in some cave somewhere? Well, among the younger folks, there's no one that's the real deal like me, who can transform perfectly… The best they can do is be good at howling."

Perhaps it was like my vampire constitution.

The world had been under the influence of oddities beyond the Rumors Squad's establishment—in the same way Kizashima-senpai was among the graduates of Naoetsu High. Surprisingly, the abnormal was right up there alongside the normal.

For better or worse.

In the first place, if we considered the graduates of Naoetsu High, then Hanekawa was certainly the single most extraordinary one. When we were still in school, Senjougahara Hitagi had designated her as a "real monster", but if I had to say it, that had actually been a prediction.

Because right now…

The twenty-three-year-old Hanekawa Tsubasa was certainly a real monster.

After graduating from high school, when she left for her round-the-world trip on that very same day, Hanekawa had still been a teenage girl with an interest in broadening her horizons out of a thirst for knowledge. Putting aside the location scouting that she did as planning in the second term of her third year, her teenage years could be considered barely falling within the range of common knowledge—or so I'd thought, carefreely believing that she'd become something like a backpacker and return to Japan in a year's time. Not knowing my own place, I resolved to not be someone that my benefactor would be ashamed of.

However, Hanekawa's round-the-world trip did not involve an itinerary of visiting popular tourist spots, and it wasn't even like backpacking, but "round-the-world" in a literal sense—it seemed she'd planned on going around visiting every country that existed on the Earth. Every single one. "Is she trying to do a stamp rally with her passport?" was what I'd said in retort, but I had nothing to say when I'd heard that she'd even managed to sneak her way into countries with isolation policies, that you couldn't get into with just a passport.

It had gone past the scope of what I could play the *tsukkomi* for.

I'd gotten picture postcards that informed me about her current circumstances, but the tidings bore pictures of scenery so different from Japan that even abstract paintings were easier to understand, to the point that I even wondered, was there a worse way to communicate than this? And in the near future, I would come to learn about the current circumstances of my schoolmate from television.

She'd been splendidly picked up by the media as a young Japanese girl who was going around helping people by participating in volunteer efforts and NGOs, removing mines, digging wells, maintaining infrastructure, and building schools and the like—and all at once, she became famous as a Japanese Joan of Arc.

Regardless of the actual contents of the news, it didn't seem very Hanekawa-like, because she hated standing out in ways like showing up on television, but apparently she'd even put herself on a billboard to quickly amass funds for her activities (according to Senjougahara Hitagi, who was close enough to her to call her by her given name).

Because of her unimaginable popularity, philanthropic movements increased explosively even within Japan. But that trend didn't last for long.

It wasn't that the fickle Japanese soon found a new idol to take their interest… Thinking about it now, I could even say that it was some incredible foresight for the media to dub her "Joan of Arc".

Just before Hanekawa turned twenty, her activities turned from relief efforts for victims of war and recovery support for war damages to becoming a mediator for wars themselves, and her personality changed as well.

Whether you called it a mediator or a peacemaker—though it was supposed to be a trip across the world that was heavily influenced by the rootless wanderer and advocate for neutrality, Oshino Meme, she had arrived at an unthinkable destination.

A war mediator.

It had become far too heavy of a portable shrine to carry around and idolize for fun. What was all the more annoying was that such activities suited her perfectly—in places around the world, she indiscriminately settled things with peace treaties and armistices, triple alliances and bitter enemies in the same boat.

She was using an eraser on the borders of the world without leaving a single line.

That had become her objective—so at a glance it seemed she'd arrived at being a peace advocate, but some people thought of her actions as dangerous, along the lines of being on the path towards world domination. She'd crossed the point of idol treatment, straight past the point of VIP treatment, and reached the point of becoming a wanted person on an international level.

Though she'd once spoken on radio broadcasts on the warfront about how she wanted to make the five rings of the Olympics into one beautiful flower, she now had a charisma that could no longer be found on billboards but could be called one beautiful revolutionary.

Nowadays, even speaking her name in public was forbidden—there was even a country where sending the name "TSUBASA HANEKAWA" in an email was considered a crime (it should be said that that country later merged with a neighboring country without even its name being left). While Japan hadn't reached that point, the public institutions were all keeping their eyes on her "people-helping".

"■■■■■■ (a greeting in some language), Araragi-kun. Are you well? Today, I've erased my sixteenth national border."

For some time, I'd been receiving picture postcards containing such messages, but before long, they'd stopped arriving—though I'd been worried that something had happened to her, it seemed that Hanekawa had begun to sever ties with me, whether she thought it'd start to be a bother for me or it'd be a hindrance to her activities.

Because it was her, I felt that she was trying to systematically alienate us, softly and gently, without trying to hurt us—and it was

possible that this return to her country was the culmination of all of that.

A culmination (shuutaisei), or perhaps a final accomplishment (shuu taisei).[6]

As if she were entering a witness protection program, she was planning on completely erasing her existence and becoming a tool made for peace—as for what spectacles she would have seen to get her to make that decision, I had no clue.

As someone who unconcernedly described the world as peaceful, I truly couldn't comprehend the meaning of her actions—would it have been so bad to spend a fun campus life with me and Hitagi?

It probably was bad for her.

Though I'd been able to become friends with that monster, I couldn't become a kindred spirit—looking at the results, our friendship was just one of those boring associations that ended upon our graduation from Naoetsu High, but the fact that Hanekawa Tsubasa was returning to the jurisdiction of the Naoetsu Police Department at the same time I'd come back to town after four years seemed like a curious twist of fate.

Although we probably wouldn't meet.

Wouldn't, or should I say, couldn't.

It wasn't particularly uncommon to be called out for escort duty like Mitome-san was, but on the contrary, I'd been given specific orders to not come close to the hotel that Hanekawa was staying at—not just me, but all her former acquaintances (even her foster parents) were given such notice.

The only ones who could enter the hotel were the ones in charge of escorting her. Even its employees would be put on forced leave that day—although the truth was that if this ultimate pacifist were to stay for longer than a day, it could possibly turn into an emergency situation that wouldn't end with an assault or an assassination.

It was even possible that the entire area that Hanekawa was in would be hit by an air raid just to target Hanekawa specifically—if they could prevent a mass panic, the government would probably even order an evacuation of the town.

Wherever Hanekawa was was considered both the ultimate peace zone as well as the most dangerous spot for all major world powers—just by her moving somewhere else, she could drastically affect international affairs.

I'd even had to be afraid of being forced to leave the country at one point. In the end, we arrived at the pragmatic approach of "doing work as usual" (although I figured that was in part due to Gaen-san's

arrangements—after all, Hanekawa was no stranger to Gaen-san, either), but compared to my friend from school who'd expanded her sphere of influence to a global level, the work that I was in charge of alongside Suou-san involved striking at the origin of certain "charms" that were being used by middle schoolers.

When you looked at it like that, my actions haven't exactly changed much since I was in high school.

It was beyond just becoming someone my benefactor wouldn't be ashamed of.

Even if Mitome-san wasn't escorting her, I still wouldn't be able to show my face to Hanekawa.

"Hmm. A cat, huh? You even gave her a name like Black Hanekawa. But that cat's no longer inside Hanekawa Tsubasa anymore, right?"

"Well, it's not that it's no longer inside her. It's more like it's settled down… Like a stray cat that got adopted by a family—also, there was a tiger, too. That one wasn't an oddity from long ago like the *sawarineko*, but a new oddity that Hanekawa herself created."

"A new oddity? That's crazy. To think she'd invented something all on her own…"

That said, it was surprising, almost shocking, to hear that Mitome-san was a descendant of werewolves tracing back to the beginning of oddity history.

As for Mitome-san's appearance, she was wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses, giving off a stylish but rough atmosphere, but what she ordered at the cafe I was taken to was hot milk.

Though she was a wolf, her selection was like that of a puppy.

Also, her leather jacket was fake leather. Though she wasn't a vegetarian, Mitome-san still supported animal rights.

"But that Kako only lives inside Hanekawa's head now, too."

"Kako?"

"Ah, that's what Hanekawa named that white tiger—for Hanekawa, Kako is one of her cute younger sisters, as is Black Hanekawa. Like entering the tiger's lair to catch a cub, I guess… At that time, it seemed she'd intended to sacrifice a lot to get both oddities in her care, but looking at the results, it seemed more like she gained more than she lost…"

At that time, Hanekawa had obtained weakness. She'd made those negative feelings and bitter memories her own—and that wasn't a bad thing. If it weren't for that, the "absolutely flawless class representative" that Hanekawa was would surely have fallen to ruin in the near future. Instead of becoming charismatic enough to change the world, she'd probably offer up her life to save some inconsequential guy (yes, for example, someone like me) and die a tragic death.

How many times had she nearly died in that spring break alone?

"Becoming stronger by learning what it means to be fragile, huh… Rather than something philosophical, it sounds like some martial arts principle. Although it seems weird that, after finally acquiring some 'humanness', she'd come back to try and erase it after all this time."

Mitome-san seemed suspicious about that, but unfortunately,

that wasn't a question that I had an answer to. Returning to erase your personal history—after going through all that, after finally learning what it meant to be weak as a human, why would she try to make it as if it never happened?

Perhaps the name "Hanekawa Tsubasa" itself had become a hindrance to her activities for peace… Although, putting aside "Tsubasa", her family name, "Hanekawa", wasn't even something that was absolute.

Because it had changed a number of times before.

But that was not what I knew about Hanekawa as a classmate, but something that Hanekawa had told me in confidence under special circumstances. Should I let Mitome-san know about that much as well…? But it wasn't the time to be mindful of her privacy.

Though it didn't exactly make me happy to spread rumors about my friend's secrets, Mitome-san was collecting information not just out of curiosity but for professional use—I probably wasn't the only one she was asking about this.

Although I was probably the only one who was aware of anything related to oddities like Black Hanekawa and Kako, she'd probably procured all the information about her complex family situation long ago.

…Although Hanekawa was now trying to make sure that information couldn't be procured.

"Ah, that's right. Speaking of things related to oddities… There were several times that I had to heal her."

"Huh? Like, you treated her injuries?"

"You could call it that, but it was healing that utilized my vampire immortality. Thinking about it now, it's not exactly something to be proud of. Although I don't regret it."

"You don't, huh?" Mitome-san gave me a wry smile. "Well, let's put that in the past. So speak. Basically, you gave the blood of the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire to Hanekawa Tsubasa, right?"

"Yes. And quite a large amount, for that matter… And I used my spit to heal her at one point, but that's minor in comparison."

"Using your spit…? I don't think that's something I can put in the past."

This werewolf's standards were rather strict, but I moved on with the conversation.

"I feel like healing her with blood had to have affected her negatively after that—she even worked together with a vampire hunter named Dramaturgy at one point. Did you know about that?"

"Nah. But I've heard the name Dramaturgy before. He's first-class at his job—and possibly even above that. Oh, so that's it. So on

top of Oshino Meme, Hanekawa Tsubasa had a second master in that vampire-killing vampire…"

Calling him a second master didn't seem to fit exactly, but, well, it was true that Dramaturgy's work etiquette could be seen in the current Hanekawa's style as well.

The work of a pro.

You never know where something you learn will be useful in life.

But the real question was not about those teachings.

"It seems that Hanekawa got this thorn-like item from Dramaturgy that could dramatically activate immortal powers within her, and she entered into a pseudo-vampire state several times after that. Um… She said it was like hay fever. The vampirism that lay dormant within her from the healing reacted to the vampire-exterminating item and produced an immune response…"

Since I didn't really understand how it worked, the explanation ended up being awkward. And apparently, she'd already used up that allergy-like factor…

"So it's pretty likely that, in her third year of high school, she had the experience of becoming a gold-haired, gold-eyed vampire not once, but continuously."

"So y'think that feeling of almighty power she experienced then is what turned her into the hero 'Hanekawa Tsubasa' now?"

"Well, regardless of Dramaturgy's way of life… I don't think her vampire experience is really related. If I had to say it, I feel like it seemed more like a tough experience for her."

She didn't thoughtlessly use her vampirism like I did.

And that feeling of almighty power as a vampire was linked to a feeling of helplessness when turning back to a human.

"I can't say that there was no backlash from it, though. It's possible that the experience of using violence to resolve a problem when something didn't go her way was what led to her extreme pacifism… Well, the biggest thing is that I know very little about her wandering lifestyle after graduation, and that's what really matters."

"That's true. If anything, what made Hanekawa Tsubasa what she is today is what she experienced after graduatin' from Naoetsu High—all right. But I can use this as a reference, Koyomi-kun. Very much."

Mitome-san said that and downed her cup of hot milk in one gulp. Well, the conversation had gotten longer than I expected it to, so it had probably cooled off by then.

"I'm glad to be of help. Please be sure to protect Hanekawa."

"You can count on me! Since it's my job. …Though I can't really say if protectin' her life and body or her ideology is more

important to preserve the world's current state of affairs."

I couldn't say, either.

At the very least, the justice that I was currently pursuing ran counter to her beliefs… Even though it was still at the stage of a pipe dream, if her activities continued to bear fruit, even the country known as Japan would end up ceasing to exist.

It was possible that the reason she came to erase her personal history that was left behind in her country of origin was not to throw away her "humanness", but in preparation for the above.

"I'm in support of pacifism, but there's a limit to good deeds, y'know."

"Yes. Even for me—that's something I've sworn to keep in mind. Although Hanekawa should've also learned as much in her high school days."

There must have been something else she learned after that.

Something that I wasn't aware of.

And, though this shouldn't be taken the wrong way, it didn't mean that what she learned was necessarily wrong.

It would actually be weirder for the "truth" she attained as a teenager to stay true to her after all this time.

Because both your common sense and your environment will change over time—even the way I was evaluating Hanekawa without being around her was weird.

"Oh yeah. It's reassuring to hear that you're in charge of her escort, Mitome-san, but wouldn't Hanekawa herself be bringing along escorts from overseas? Like some sort of secret police, or bodyguards."

"Hanekawa Tsubasa has no affiliation to any organization or group, after all. For everything she does, she gathers people from here and there, and then breaks them up after she achieves her goal. It sounds like her basis for doing so is because she thinks 'keeping groups permanent leads them to ruin', was what a team of psychologists concluded after analyzin' her—though she's not anti-authority, she is anti-establishment."

Well, she was like that even as a high schooler.

While she was an honors student, due to such and such reasons, she barely came to school for the latter half of her third year—and people had blamed her absence on me, the vice-representative.

"Well, she's not an idiot, so I'm sure she won't do anything stupid like completely entrust her safety to the local escorts. She'll probably have some safety measures in place… I'm just takin' extra precautions by sniffin' stuff up right now. There isn't really anything I need to do as a werewolf. If there was, that would mean the entire town was at risk of annihilation."

"Please don't say something so scary."

“Well, if Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade decided to come out of that shadow and assist with the escort, there’d be nothing to worry about.”

“Unfortunately, that’s an impossible request. She’s lost a lot of her power, obviously, but in the first place, vampires and cats aren’t very compatible… I don’t think she’ll even help me with my work until this whole racket is over.”

“You’re talkin’ like she’s allergic to cats or something. Well, don’t worry, in the case of an emergency, this werewolf alone can save the town. But I have something to ask you, not as a police officer, but as a police dog. Is there anything valuable that you got from Hanekawa, like a present or something?”

“Um…”

Despite the intrusiveness of the question, I couldn’t figure out her intentions for asking.

A gift from Hanekawa?

“I know I’m kinda invadin’ your privacy, but I am the ‘canine policewoman’. If there’s anything with her scent on it, that’d be great.”

“For her escort?”

“Just to be sure, y’know. But my position’s really more as support, so I don’t think I’ll get a chance to get close to her, so if I can get her scent, I should be able to track her down if it ever gets to that… Any ideas?”

“Uh, let’s see… I feel like we had to have exchanged presents at one point, but since it’s been five years… And since I’ve moved around a bit, I don’t have any good feelings about it…”

Though I mumbled as such, there was in fact a “present” that came to mind.

However, that went drastically beyond the realm of privacy… Though I didn’t go as far as taking it with me to my lodgings, I was sure they were still in my room at my parents’ house. That is, Hanekawa Tsubasa’s underwear made up of her brassiere and shorts, as well as the braids that she had me cut off before the cultural festival.

I didn’t want to seem like a pervert to the senpai I had managed to speak honestly with.

It was a group of items that I wasn’t exactly sure what to do with anymore, unable to throw them away or move them somewhere else—and since so much time had passed, while it probably could be used for DNA analysis, her scent should certainly have faded. Even though I hadn’t exactly been in my right mind in high school, I certainly hadn’t gone as far as putting them in a Ziploc bag and hiding them in a freezer to preserve them… They had not been very well

preserved.

"Is that so?" said Mitome-san.

It didn't sound like she expected much from the beginning, but her follow-up question sounded more like the question she really wanted to ask.

"Then, Koyomi-kun. Can you tell me one last thing? How much of a chance do you think there is for Hanekawa Tsubasa to try to come visit you during her stay here?"

"I'm prohibited from meeting her directly."

"Yeah, but that just means that you're prohibited from goin' to see her, right? I'm askin' bout the possibility of her coming to see you."

Though there had been questions I could answer immediately, this question didn't seem like one of them, so I decided to take the time to think about it.

And in that time, Mitome-san said, to make sure, "I mean, even though you were pretty vague about it, it wasn't like you were just friends or just classmates if you don't count the stuff about oddities, right? Isn't it possible that she has any particular feelings about you or anything?"

"……"

Including that in my thoughts, I formulated my response.

The possibility of Hanekawa coming to meet me was…

"Zero. There's no need to worry about that."

"Is that so? All right. Sorry about asking too much of you."

That apology itself was too much, really.

005

There were two pieces of bad news.

Although normally, in cases like these, you were supposed to have one each of good news and bad news, I only had bad news to share. And two pieces of it, at that.

The first had to do with the investigation into “charms” that I was performing with Suou-san. We’d made little progress, and the incident did vividly resemble a series of events that had occurred in this town in the past, but it seemed our search would not end with a bang but with a whimper. There was nothing incident-like, there were no damages, and there wasn’t even a clear point of origin—in other words, it was the gossip you’d get from stereotypical kids, without any villains scheming anything in the background.

There were no con men in the picture. Not even any copycats.

“It seems like we can just leave this rumor alone. There’s the possibility that trying to influence it from outside could actually make it worse, too. Let’s just continue with follow-up observations and see where the wind takes it,” concluded Suou-san.

Right, if we tried to manage everything and anything, the Rumors Squad could unthinkably become some sort of thought police.

And though we didn’t have the sense of achievement that came from a straightforward investigation, it wasn’t unfortunate or bad news to have a case end up being pointless—the bad news was that I wasn’t able to arrest any con men.

Though he hadn’t kept it perfectly, that Kaiki bastard must really be keeping his promise of not entering this town—he had a surprising amount of integrity, even for someone I’d arrest on the spot if I ever saw him back in this town.

Putting that aside, the second piece of bad news was that, hiding in the shadow of the news of Hanekawa Tsubasa’s return that had the public institutions in an uproar, my younger sister, Araragi Tsukihi, had stealthily returned to our parents’ home.

She was having ice cream in the living room as soon as she came home.

No, no, of course, being able to see the sister I loved when I least expected it was a joyous occasion, no matter the circumstances. But what prevented this from being categorized as “good news” was the reason Tsukihi had returned. She hadn’t come back after learning of my own return, aiming for my training period, and she hadn’t come back because it was close to New Year’s—she’d come back because she’d dropped out of the overseas college she’d enrolled in.

Dropping out for the second time.

This wasn't just bad news, it was the worst.

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm planning on entering a new school, anyway. Although it's not going to be a college, but a dance school."

"What are you even trying to become? What kind of person even is my sister?"

"Relax. At least, I'm really proud of you, onii-chan. You career bastard."

"You wanna die?"

"Since the Araragi family is full of straight-laced people, it's no fun if you don't have at least one person like me. When a crisis befalls this family, the playful youngest child can lead them to salvation!"

"You're more likely to bring us to ruin. Isn't it your fault that Karen-chan and I can't get any promotions?"

"Oh, please, rolling around in your lust for promotions. Meanwhile, all I thought about was simply dancing in casinos."

That made me uneasy.

Karen had simply been elated at her close sister's sudden return and was now showing off her skills in the kitchen—she somehow seemed to be in even higher spirits than when her brother had come back home.

It made me ashamed.

To think that the first thing I would see when I came home tired from work was my younger sister in Japanese clothing… Had she come here like that from the airport?

How had she managed to get through the Hanekawa countermeasures?… In her own way, this girl wasn't exactly normal.

She had, for some reason, tied her hair up in two braids that fell onto her shoulders.

The hairstyle resembled that of Hanekawa in her honor student days.

Because Hanekawa Tsubasa was famous even overseas, it was unlikely that Tsukihi was unaware of her return…

"Oh yeah. I heard about that from Senjougahara-san when I met up with her the other day."

"What, you met with Hitagi? Although I knew you were keeping in touch…"

No matter how good you were with languages, it was valuable to have someone you could speak with in your native language, so even Senjougahara Hitagi and Araragi Tsukihi had become friends over text, despite not having had any close relationships before.

Although, the places they lived were farther apart than the distance between Hokkaido and Okinawa…

"Yeah. When I texted her that I dropped out, she got worried and came to see me."

“Don’t just tell people important information over text!”

“That’s why I came here to tell you directly, onii-chan.”

She sure did grow up to be carefree.

Even though she forbade Hitagi from telling me because she knew I’d object, and only told me about it after the fact.

…Well, whatever.

It was fine if there was just one person like her in this family.

“So. How long do you plan on staying? Are you going to be here for New Year’s? I’m sure our beloved parents will be coming back for that, too.”

“Hmm. Our behooved parents, huh.”

“Not behooved. Beloved.”[7]

“Well, I’m happy that you want to spend that much time together with me, onii-chan, but I’m taking off tomorrow.”

Although I already told Karen that, said Tsukihi, licking on the cap of the ice cream container.

This girl hadn’t even learned an ounce of decorum, even when she was about to turn twenty… But tomorrow?

“What do you mean by that? Suddenly departing after suddenly arriving? That’s barely a fraction of a second. What, are you some kind of jet-setter? And where are you even getting the money? Our doting parents should really start cutting off your allowance.”

“He-ey. Even though you still got yours until you were twenty-two?”

“Answer me! If you’ve fallen into a life of crime, even if you’re my sister, I’ll have to arrest you even if I’ll be crying while I do it. And then I’ll come and interrogate you every day.”

“That sounds like a wonderful proposal, but don’t worry! I haven’t fallen into a life of crime. Yet.”

“Don’t say ‘yet’!”

“I’m tearfully working some small, pitiful jobs, and paying for my dance school tuition myself.”

When she said that, it made it sound like Tsukihi’s living environment was like Kanbaru squeezing out money to pay for her medical school tuition, but why did the impression I got feel so vastly different?… Maybe because she was related to me, I only saw her flaws?

I supposed I would always be worried about my sister… Although anyone would find themselves worrying about someone like her.

“Also, it’s not like I’m leaving the country tomorrow. I’m planning on sightseeing around the Tokyo area for a bit. I might visit again before I go. I’ll be counting on you then!”

Around the area… That was definitely some careful thought-

out planning.

I doubted she even made reservations at hotels to stay at while sightseeing.

Well, considering that she got a visa and spent time overseas, not pitifully but powerfully, the capital of Japan could be considered a peaceful paradise, but the current peace level of the country was in the middle of being drastically rewritten.

Although, saying that, staying in this town could be even more dangerous, so I figured I'd let her go sightseeing as she pleased. But I doubted she'd find lodgings in advance with the way she plunged into things… I guess I'd have to be the adult here and make reservations for her.

"I'll pay for the hotel fees, too. I'll be your sponsor for whatever funds you need while you're in Japan."

"Onii-chan, you're too soft on your sisters, aren't you? Even though you groped your sister's boobs in the past."

"Don't bring that up as a comparison. Weren't we both just tiny kids back then?"

"Uh, no, your height back then was about the same as you are right now."

"Well, your boobs were tiny."

"Your attitude is pretty much the same as it is now, isn't it! Unlike my boobs."

But I'll pass on the funds, said my sister that was tiny (in height).

"Hey, now, why pass on money when you're drowning in poverty?"

"I'm not drowning in poverty. Being a tutor in Japanese actually pays quite a bit."

"Cheekily getting a part-time job… But your career bastard onii-chan has a salary, y'know. Let me at least pay for your hotel fees."

"I won't even have any hotel fees. Onii-chan, I bet you just think I'm just going on a sightseeing course without thinking, but I already made arrangements to stay with a friend. Did you already forget about her? Sengoku Nadeko-chan."

Was she looking down on her brother's memory?

Although she did have a point… But, aha.

The concept of staying with a friend was foreign to me, as someone who didn't have friends… Or rather, she was still friends with Sengoku, huh? Even though it would've been troublesome since they didn't go to the same school… Although I didn't know the details, since she was a mangaka, she'll be working pretty hard, right?

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'll help her out with her work, too.

As an assistant to the great Sengoku Nadeshiko-sensei. As her chief assistant."

"Don't suddenly try to command Sengoku's team. Doesn't that make you the one with a lust for promotions?"

"I can at least help with pencil shading."

"What great artistic skills you have there."

Don't say it as if you can help with doing the beta inking.

My sister was such that the more she tried to lend a hand with something, the less she actually helped that person out.

"All right, all right. Do as you like, and live as you like. Live freely for my sake, too. But take it slow just for tonight, okay?"

"That's right. While we're here, do you wanna take a bath together for the first time in a while? Since I'm still barely a teenager."

"That would be bad for any teenager!"

And with that, Karen called from the kitchen, "Onii-chan, Tsukihi-chan, dinner's ready, so help me take it over there!"

Right, even if we couldn't help her with cooking, we should at least help her set the table… But the only one to get up was me, while Tsukihi took the remote control and began to watch television.

What a freewheeling person.

"Hm? Karen-chan, isn't this way too many plates? I know how much you want to welcome this idiot, but no matter how you look at it, this is way too much for just three people."

"What are you talking about, nii-chan. There are four of us!"

"Eh?"

Now that she said that, it wasn't just the amount of cooking. There was even an extra set of cutlery with chopsticks and forks laid out on the table… Could it possibly be that one of my parents, with their investigative abilities, heard of Tsukihi's return and took the bullet train back home?

"That's not it, nii-chan… Didn't you hear from Tsukihi-chan? I was sure that you'd already given the okay for it…"

Karen-chan's expression dropped in an instant from showing a good mood to an "oh no, this isn't good" face.

"We might get fired for violating orders, then, huh. Both me and you."

"Eh…?"

Oh, no, don't tell me.

There was a third piece of bad news?

As I turned pale with a foreboding premonition, the door to the living room opened.

"Good morning, Tsukihi-chan, Karen-chan. Sorry for borrowing

your bed. Has Araragi-kun come back yet?”

And, rubbing her eyes with her left hand while smoothing down her bed hair with her right hand, a very sleepy, pajama-clad Hanekawa Tsubasa appeared.

The symbol of peace. The Japanese Joan of Arc. The young champion of the modern era. The anti-war revolutionary. The single flower that bloomed across the nations—as I heard those many catchphrases that described her, I too had earnestly built up the image of “TSUBASA HANEKAWA” in my mind. But suddenly meeting my classmate like this made me see her not as any of those descriptions, but as just a 23-year-old girl.

A dignified atmosphere, or a well-prepared dependability, or a finely honed appearance. If we were talking about those, then the women I worked with fit the description far better—well, it was true that I was first seeing her half-asleep and in sleepwear, but she gave off an even more absentminded impression than she did in high school.

Even after going “Oh, how embarrassing” with a shy chuckle and taking a seat, her eyes seemed drowsy—it could just be that she hadn’t put her contact lenses in, but anyway, if we were speaking of the symbol of peace, then this in itself was very much like a symbol of peace, so to speak.

But her seated posture made me really want to ask, what part of this makes you an international person of importance?

Though she hadn’t grown much compared to high school, almost to the point of making me wonder if she actually got younger, there was naturally still a change in her appearance—the hair she had cut short had grown back long.

It was probably longer than when she had kept her hair in braids.

Although the black and white stripes were the same as when she had a bob cut… Or no, didn’t it somehow feel like there was more black hair? After a certain point, the media had stopped broadcasting any images of “TSUBASA HANEKAWA”, after all—I wouldn’t be able to compare even if I went to the past—so I couldn’t say for sure.

Although it was currently at a state that couldn’t just be dealt with by smoothing it down with her hands.

“What is it, Araragi-kun? Staring at me like that. Ahaha, do I look that charming to you when I wear pajamas? I borrowed these from Karen-chan, though, so they’re a little baggy.”

“No, that’s not it…”

It’s not like it’s the first time I’m seeing it, was what I began to say, before I stopped myself, remembering that my sisters were at the table, too.

Speaking of which, the trend of Araragi Koyomi seeing those of

the opposite sex half-naked after just getting to know them started with Hanekawa, didn't it… But what was different now was that Hanekawa back then wasn't the type that could've stayed calm after being seen in sleepwear by a guy (and there were those of the type that could stay calm—examples: Senjougahara Hitagi, Kanbaru Suruga).

Back then, she'd cover up with a coat or something.

Thinking that, today's Hanekawa had descended from the second floor (she hadn't just borrowed Karen's pajamas, but her bed as well) and had been surprised to see that I'd finished work and come home early, but even as she said that she was embarrassed, she didn't bother going back to the second floor to change.

Well, no matter what life she led in the past few years, she probably wouldn't have been able to survive with such a naive and delicate sensitivity—even a shy maiden can turn bold.

But no matter how indispensable boldness was, both overseas and at warfronts, coming here today and wearing Karen's pajamas, sleeping in Karen's bed, and eating Karen's homemade food was just a little too brazen—well, in terms of food, clothing, and shelter, that was just a matter of Hanekawa and Karen's relationship, so I wouldn't interfere. The real problem was that this was happening "today".

My senior was probably pulling an all-nighter for the sake of protecting this girl—how did that escort target end up partaking in dinner at the Araragi household as if it was the most normal thing in the world?

I glared at Tsukihi.

And, as if understanding me just from the mere eye contact we'd made, she said, "What? Didn't I tell you? I came back with Hanekawa-san," tilting her head with a blank face.

She didn't tell me.

We'd only talked about how those braids reminded me of the old Hanekawa—and I hope she didn't think that that in itself was good enough of a report that she'd returned to this town with Hanekawa.

That kind of nonverbal communication doesn't exist!

No matter how related we were, that was just impossible.

"Huh? Didn't I say that I heard from Senjougahara-san that Hanekawa-san was coming back?"

"You did…"

"What about how Senjougahara-san had been entrusted with a message from Hanekawa-san?"

"You didn't say anything about that."

I didn't really get the whole story, but it sounded like she'd actually laid the groundwork in advance—I doubted that I'd make any

progress dealing with such a carefree Tsukihi, so I turned my eyes to my still-employed sister who had become a full-fledged member of society.

"Um, no, I was totally sure that this had already gone through you, nii-chan. Since if you knew, you would have gotten in contact with Boss. I mean, I was also forbidden from meeting up with Tsubasa-san, too," said Karen, as if she was making excuses.

It seemed she called the section chief of the Public Safety Squad "Boss", but I couldn't care less about that custom—and the chain of command was different, so it would've been weird for me to suddenly put myself in there.

Although, I was in the same boat for not alerting my superiors about Hanekawa Tsubasa's current location, as well as eating dinner together with her.

I wondered if I should make the report now, at least, but I wasn't sure… As a policeman, that was something I should've done reflexively, but I'd been caught off-guard by her sleepwear-clad form, and I was thinking on an empty stomach, so I'd ended up taking my seat at the table, which was bad.

It meant that I had the time to hesitate.

If it was a problem for such a world-famous celebrity to be in a private home with no escorts and no security measures and nobody aware of it, then it was also a problem that she had managed to slip away from those perfect escort preparations to be here.

It was a huge problem—and a huge failure.

If word got out that Hanekawa Tsubasa had been exposed to danger, then international trust in Japan would plummet—at the very least, the entire Naoetsu Police Department would be destroyed. It wouldn't stop at just the Rumors Squad. It wouldn't stop at just the dismissal of me and Karen. The unemployment rate of the prefecture would rise in an instant.

How much of an uproar were they in right now?

"Ah, um. It's all right, Araragi-kun. You're such a worrywart as always. But don't worry, I managed to slip away from them without being noticed. And I plan on leaving without being noticed, too."

"Really… Then…"

Was that really fine?

To incite an entire country to stand guard over an empty hotel in itself was pretty shameless… What would Mitome-san think if she heard about this?

Seeing as I'd so confidently declared that there was zero possibility that Hanekawa would come to see me, I was nothing but extremely apologetic.

If I had offered Mitome-san the "Hanekawa keepsake items"

that were the underwear and braids, she probably would have begun tracking her down… At this point, was it good or bad that I hadn't?

"I can't feel at ease in a hotel suite, you see… It's way more comfortable at a campground. Ah, but of course, Karen-chan's bed is perfectly comfortable, too. I've completely gotten over my jet lag."

Even though her drowsy atmosphere made me wonder if she had really gotten over it, in any case, it seemed Hanekawa had absolutely no sense of danger—even though this could turn into an international crisis.

Although it was possible the term "international" didn't even exist for her as she was now.

"I didn't really want to take my meals in such a stiff setting, either. Rather than room service, I wanted to eat some home cooking like this. Araragi-kun, if you're not going to eat that, can I have some?"

"Ah… Go ahead."

"Onii-chan, if you're not going to eat that, can I have some, too?" asked Tsukihi.

"You can go and starve."

"Well, nothin' we can do since she's already here, nii-chan. Thinking about it, we let Hanekawa-san stay here before—although at that time, you were away for a bit, weren't you?"

It seemed Karen had gotten over it with that.

A mental strength expected of someone who still went to her dojo three times a week.

It made my hesitation seem shameful.

"Just think about it like this. If I'd gotten rounded up as part of the escort team, then I wouldn't've been able to have dinner like this with Hanekawa-san. So I think I'm pretty lucky!"

If this was supposed to be lucky, then it was some artificial good luck… But I guess that was fine?

Nevertheless, it seemed my sisters—Tsukihi, obviously, but even Karen, though she'd prepared for the worst—did not care that they were in the presence of such an important person.

Or maybe I was the one that had gotten too caught up in my own thoughts? Perhaps, after being in the company of my past acquaintance like I'd done in the past, I didn't have any confidence in my past self… If that was true, it was just me having an inferiority complex on my own.

"Well, putting aside being forbidden from seeing her… Was there anyone dispatched to help out from your squad, too? One person from my squad went out to help."

"Saisaki Mitome-san, right?"

"Huh. You know her?"

Then you should've told me. It's already my third month of training, y'know?

"I mean, I don't know her personally, but she's pretty famous, and I've seen her face a lot at tournaments. Police martial arts tournaments."

"Oh, really."

"There are rumors that she got sent down to the Naoetsu Police Department because she caused some scandal, but if she got put in charge of Hanekawa-san's escort, then it doesn't sound like she did anything wrong."

So rumors like that had flown around… The gossip was pretty outrageous.

Though she herself probably didn't mind, it seemed disgraceful to her as a wolf.

Even though I was only her junior temporarily, I wanted to try and restore her reputation somehow, but then again, there was no worse scandal than allowing such an important person out of her sight.

"It sounds like Gaen-san's plans are pretty successful, then," remarked Hanekawa, unprompted.

Since we were in front of Karen and Tsukihi, she didn't say anything more, but it seemed she had kept herself up-to-date on the details of the Rumors Squad's foundation. Despite her drowsy expression, she was as quick-witted as ever.

She was really sharp-eyed—and just sharp.

I doubted she was still in contact with Gaen-san even now… Well, regardless, this seemed like the right timing to use that line.

"Hanekawa. You really know everything, don't you?"

"I don't know everything. I just know what I know," responded Hanekawa with a chuckle.

Like she'd done in the past—except today, Hanekawa added one thing more.

"Whenever I come to know something, the number of things I don't know increases."

Even someone who knows will someday turn into someone who doesn't know.

After dinner, it was time for a shared bath.

Of course, not shared between me and Hanekawa, and not between me and Karen, but between the close sisters Karen and Tsukihi—it seemed my sisters were being considerate of me, who had a lot to catch up on with my old classmate.

Well, those two, being the former “Tsuganoki 2nd Middle School Fire Sisters”, also probably had a lot to catch up on.

“Well, I can’t just eat up without doing anything in return,” said Hanekawa, declaring that she’d wash the dishes. “Will I wash the dishes, or will I get a person to eat?”

That was really something an *azukiarai* would say. But anyway, I couldn’t just let a visitor do all the work on their own, so I went up to the sink next to Hanekawa to use the sponge and dish soap.

“Ahaha. It almost seems like we could be a married couple.”

That was a dangerous joke.

Even more dangerous when you took into account Hanekawa’s relaxed pajama look.

But, even as she acted jokingly, her skill with the dishes was something that I couldn’t even begin to compare to—though I’d been living independently for a while now, I wouldn’t be able to handle those dishes so swiftly.

It ended up being that for all the dishes I’d washed, Hanekawa would wash them again—so there was basically no reason for me to be there.

What kind of double-checking attitude was this?

“I just remembered after saying ‘married couple’, but are things going well with Hitagi-chan?”

“It’s a little embarrassing to be reminded of us by ‘married couple’, but Hanekawa, don’t you already know about that, too?”

“Yeah. I already heard from Hitagi-chan herself.”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t you go overseas, too, Araragi-kun? I think it would be nice if you spent more time with Hitagi-chan.”

“Well, I am a government official, after all. I pledged allegiance to my country.”

“Oh.”

I was trying to evade the question, but Hanekawa’s response was shorter than I expected… Well, it was true that she was fighting the very concept of countries, so to her, a government official was an enemy among enemies.

It was a little awkward. And because I was essentially doing

the same work that I'd been doing, it was a little more awkward.

I'd unconsciously ended up looking for how Hanekawa had changed and hadn't changed from how she was in the past, with the viewpoint of comparing Hanekawa Tsubasa and "TSUBASA HANEKAWA"—but from Hanekawa's point of view, it was probably me who'd changed a lot.

Although that was true as well.

When I was in my third year of high school, the only one I pledged allegiance to was Hanekawa herself.

Aside from a vampire.

"…How long do you have until you have to go back to your hotel?"

Since I thought it would be awkward if the silence continued, I changed the subject.

Though I asked how long, I thought it would be good if she could leave even a second earlier, but I couldn't exactly say to a visitor that I wanted her to leave.

No matter what I'd said, I did feel happy that, when she came back, Hanekawa had slipped through the defenses to come to see me.

The fact that I felt more confusion than happiness was something I could chalk up to me being older, because if Araragi Koyomi had been a high schooler, he'd be jumping up and down with glee.

I guess that could also be what it meant to be a professional.

"It's not really a matter of 'how long'. I'm not Cinderella. I'm actually Sleeping Beauty."

"So you're a princess? I heard you were a revolutionary."

Ignoring my attempt to poke fun at her, Hanekawa said, "Actually, it'll be harder to go back than it was to slip away. Because what I used wasn't a locked room trick, but an escape room trick," as she polished the plates until they were squeaking. "Maybe it's something that I should have Ougi-chan settle for me. Is Ougi-chan doing well?"

"Mm… I guess she's doing fine. She's definitely lively."

"Have you met up with Kanbaru-san? And what happened to Oikura-san after that? And Sengoku-chan? And have you gone to see Mayoi-chan already?"

"Oi, oi. What happened? You're spouting off all these nostalgic names one by one."

Since I'd changed the subject first, I couldn't exactly complain when the subject was changed again, but her rapid-fire questions were a bit weird. She wasn't waiting for my answers—or maybe she just wanted me to put them all together before answering.

"I've met up with Kanbaru. At the hospital by chance… I

haven't kept in touch with Oikura at all… Not since that one case. Sengoku's not even in town anymore. Although I didn't see her before she left. For Hachikuji… I was thinking of going for my first shrine visit."

It kind of felt like I was making my ingratitude distinct by putting it into words.

I was really bad at socializing.

Was I really related to those sisters of mine?

I'm sure that Sengoku would've stayed in town if I hadn't messed up in my interactions with her… Or maybe that was me being overly self-conscious.

But in terms of being overly self-conscious, that was probably the case for me with Hanekawa, too.

If I hadn't gotten to know Hanekawa during that spring break, let alone seeing her half-naked, would she even have gone as far as being called the Japanese Joan of Arc overseas?

Well, if she'd stayed the "absolutely flawless class representative", she would've fallen to ruin before turning twenty, but it was possible she would've been able to get a handle on her talents eventually without having to rely on Black Hanekawa or Kako.

Like Mitome-san and her wolfishness.

That would've brought her closer to the "ordinary girl" that she wanted to become—and, though I could be speaking out of ingratitude, the Hanekawa now could hardly be considered that.

Doing something like erasing her past for the sake of the future.

…Well, if it's living in the future over living in the past, then that was true for me, and true for everyone. Because no matter how much you thought about the answer to "Why did you become like this," it would end up being either blaming someone else or blaming yourself.

You shouldn't blame God or oddities.

"Don't be too concerned over old friends. Or did you suddenly get some lingering attachments when you decided that you were going to erase your past? Even for you…"

"Hmm, I wonder about that. To say it bluntly, I didn't ask because I was all that curious. Although I am curious about what will happen to everyone 'afterwards', my head is full of something else right now."

Well, perhaps.

Not even I thought that my hometown should be prioritized over all of humanity… World peace, *banzai*!

"Well, for Karen and me, our jobs are on the line, after all. So it would be great if you could figure out a good way to leave. Find

something in that mind of yours.”

It probably seemed like I was just changing the subject again, but I was seriously asking—regardless of me or Karen, I definitely didn’t want to be a bother to my senpai, Mitome-san.

That was how I socialized, now.

“Even if it’s you, it can’t be that easy to erase your history. Or are you trying to become a different person altogether?”

“Um. Mmm. Araragi-kun, it seems like you’re under a pretty big misunderstanding, but this visit isn’t just incidental to my return to Japan, you know?”

“Eh?”

“Erasing my history was just my official stance—I don’t actually care about doing any of that. My origin can become a weak point for my activities, but it’s good to have weaknesses like that. If anything, that’s really what’s incidental,” said Hanekawa. As she continued to wash the dishes.

“The reason I came back was to see you, Araragi-kun.”

“When I said my head was full of other things, that obviously meant that my head was full of thoughts of you, Araragi-kun. Though I feel bad for everyone else. Do you want me to tell you something good? When I was in high school, I was in love with you, Araragi-kun. You didn’t notice, did you?”

She said it rather indifferently, as if she was humming without realizing it, but it was true that I hadn’t noticed—at least until she’d confessed to me directly.

“Ahaha. I just wanted to try saying something like that. Going back to the guy I fell in love with in high school and telling them about it as an adult.”

“…It’s the first good news I heard today.”

“My, my.”

“But… It’s all in the past, right?”

“That’s right. It’s something from the past. However, Araragi-kun, if you really want it no matter what, I wouldn’t mind going out with you, all right?”

“Was that also something you wanted to try saying?”

“Nope. That was something I regretted as soon as I said it. What a mistake,” said Hanekawa, closing her eyes.

It wasn’t clear what she was imagining on the back of her eyelids, what memory she was looking for in her mind.

I no longer had any way of understanding what Hanekawa was thinking.

If she had incidentally dropped by to see me while doing something else, that would’ve made me happy—I might have even ended up grinning ear-to-ear even after Hanekawa left.

But if she came to Japan solely to come see me…

Or possibly, Hanekawa didn’t even have the sensation of having “returned” at all. Because she had long since become an “earthling”, and had most likely spread her wings and left the nest known as Japan.

Hanekawa Tsubasa. A girl with unusual wings.

No—she was no longer a girl.

“…Why?”

That inelegant question could have even carried a hint of anger. But even if it wasn’t elegant, I certainly didn’t think it was unreasonable—right?

How many people across the country had been mobilized for the sake of her wanting to see me? Even though it could’ve changed international affairs, risked public order, and even caused war or

internal strife, the reason for coming home to reunite with an old friend? Even putting aside Mitome-san's circumstances, even putting aside my and Karen's jobs being at risk, it was still incredibly thoughtless, and an incredibly childish act.

Who would've thought someone like Hanekawa would do such a self-centered act that not even someone like Tsukihi would do.

"Why would you do something like that?"

"Um. Mmm. Well, I can think of two possible reasons why I snuck over here to see you."

"You can think of two possible reasons…"

"It's like Schrodinger's cat. Is the cat in the box alive or dead—and as for the right answer, well, let's see. If you can correctly guess the trick to how I managed to escape from the box, the hotel that was being closely guarded, then I'll tell you which of them is right."

Explaining the trick, huh. It reminded me of the old days. Although that was really Ougi-chan's role.

…But that wasn't it, because Ougi-chan had left my side already. She'd stopped coiling around me like the darkness of the night and splendidly discovered her own role to play—and, in the first place, I was a policeman.

What would I do if I couldn't deduce the trick to a locked room on my own?

"Right. But it's not a locked room trick, it's an escape room trick."

In the broadest sense, I felt that the two were the same, but I suppose a locked room does require a body to remain in the room—the body of a cat.

Schrodinger's cat.

"So, what are the two possible reasons? To the point of putting into chaos the world that you were trying to make peaceful."

"Number one. About trying to make the world peaceful… I got tired of it."

"……"

"Like, the opposite of Cinderella? I got exhausted of being treated like a saint, and I wanted to run away from everything. I want to go back to how it was in the past. To when Araragi-kun would tease me about my huge breasts… Because of my strict eating habits, even my chest has shrunk a little. Did you notice?"

"How would I notice? Those pajamas are huge on you."

"Yeah. I wanted to go back to when we could have conversations like this."

Being treated like a saint, huh… Although I'd treated her more like the Virgin Mary.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. I would've been fine with

just being able to help the people that I could reach. Really, how did this all happen—”

Well, her reach did end up extending all the way to the other side of the Earth, but that probably wasn’t the explanation she wanted —plus, that “number one” wasn’t necessarily true.

I mean, it was possible, but was *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa really the type that went, “I’d been propped up as a symbol of peace before I knew it”?

If her talents had simply been dressed up, she wouldn’t have become this much of a sensation.

Not to mention losing heart after that and coming to see someone like me.

“Are you still saying ‘someone like me’? You convinced yourself that way in the past, too, Araragi-kun. Getting fixed on thinking, ‘There’s no way *that* Hanekawa Tsubasa would fall in love with someone like me.’ Even though you have no idea how much hope I placed in you.”

“No, that’s—”

“And number two. I came to scout you, Araragi-kun.”

Without letting me make any excuses, Hanekawa presented the second option.

“Were you aware that I was doing all my work alone? Or maybe you weren’t that interested in the work I was doing, Araragi-kun? In any case, since I’m not affiliated with any organization, I don’t have any friends that share my beliefs—just cooperating, and nothing but cooperating, with those who came to cooperate at the time. I did that this whole time because I thought it would contradict what I was doing if I didn’t do it like that, but I feel like I’m at my limit. My beliefs are falling apart. I did some serious self-reflection about my high school days… And my mental care is important, too. So even if their motives are different from mine, I want a partner I can trust.”

“…A partner?”

Mitome-san had indeed spoken of Hanekawa’s independent action. That itself gave a slight amount of authenticity to “number two”, but still, a partner?

“Yes, a partner. Someone who can support me when I need it most—or someone who can set me right when I need it most. And I couldn’t think of anyone else but Araragi-kun. Although I’ve seen every country in the world, there was no one like Araragi-kun—no one who’d risk their life to try and stop me when I was being stupid. No one who’d try and stop my genius.”

“……”

“So, which of these two reasons is the real one? Not even I know.”

Until you open the box.

Though she'd been looking at my hands washing dishes this whole time, Hanekawa finally turned to face me.

"Do you have the courage to open the box? Will you be able to understand the feelings that I don't even know?"

"…I wonder. Regardless of what I choose, it all sounds like it's wrapped up in smoke and mirrors."

I glanced away, unable to meet her eyes—but I couldn't completely turn away from her. In the first place, without even properly looking at my hands, I'd been doing the dishes while watching Hanekawa next to me the whole time—no wonder the dishes weren't getting clean.

I was looking at her black and white hair.

I was even looking at the gray that had been mixed in.

"So I'll put aside the escape room trick deduction and answer both patterns for now. If the reason you came here was 'number one', then my response would be 'Then quit'. I'd say that your peace of mind is more important than the peace of the world—although if I said that, you'd surely fly into a rage, remember your beliefs, and return to your hotel."

"I see, I see. And in the case of 'number two'?"

"I'd respectfully decline."

"Because you're a government official?"

"Because I'm a member of the Rumors Squad. Although it's only for training. Right now, the peace of this town is more important than your peace of mind. The peace of this town that you spent your teenage years in."

"…But that answer is what sounds like smoke and mirrors to me. Even though I'm right here, Araragi-kun, what you've been looking at all this time was the old me."

It was a harsh indication, but for some strange reason, it made me a little happy.

The old Hanekawa Tsubasa.

But for the 'old Hanekawa Tsubasa', which time period were we talking about?

The absolutely flawless class representative? Black Hanekawa? After she cut her hair? When her hair became striped after she took in that white tiger and acquired weakness?—and there was even the Hanekawa Tsubasa that had once carried with her that gold-haired, gold-eyed vampirism.

And there were even times when Hanekawa Tsubasa had not been Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"Although it would've been fine if you didn't try to be so shrewd, and instead said, 'I know how you feel!' and gave me a hug.

Regardless of whether my feelings were ‘number one’ or ‘number two’, that would’ve solved everything.”

“I wouldn’t use such a master-key-like lie on anyone, much less you. Am I supposed to be able to understand something that you don’t? Even when I was a high school third-year, and even now as a 23-year-old, I’m just full of things I don’t understand. Things I don’t understand, and things I don’t know.”

I don’t know everything. I don’t know anything.

Just once, Hanekawa had said that—and with what feelings she had when she said that, I still didn’t understand.

“Right. Then, what about the escape room trick? Did you figure it out?”

Ultimately, I figured that Hanekawa would probably have been able to handle anything… Since she was a revolutionary that could cross any border, I doubted it was impossible for her to weave through a gap in any perfect escort.

If there was a single clue she’d left, it was the statement she herself had made, that “it’ll be harder to go back than it was to slip away”… If anything, this was a hint.

Most likely, it wasn’t any method that involved showing off but some sort of simple shortcut that hit a blind spot… Since she wasn’t the kind to come up with any weird schemes.

At least, if it was the Hanekawa I knew… If someone like that existed.

But even if we said that ‘the Hanekawa from when I knew her’ existed, the Hanekawa that had gone around the world would have certainly expanded her knowledge, and it was possible she had used an idea that I could never think of.

No matter how much she flattered me by saying that “there was no one like Araragi-kun”, I couldn’t swallow that at all. There were probably plenty of people like me, without even needing to use the Rumors Squad as reference, and she had to have met, gotten disappointed with, gotten hopeful for, and gotten used to someone like me—for Hanekawa, the period of time when Araragi Koyomi was special to her should have long since been over.

That’s right. I could think of a third pattern where neither “number one” nor “number two” were correct—or rather, that was the one that seemed the most probable. What if Hanekawa had come to the Araragi household for a completely different purpose?

If that was the case—I got it.

For the first time tonight, there was something I finally understood.

But I didn’t point it out.

I’d even lost interest in discussing the escape room trick that

I'd gotten a clue to.

So instead, I said this.

"…Hey, Hanekawa. In exchange for telling me something good, do you want to hear something bad?"

"What? I do, I do."

"For me—when I was in high school, I was in love with you, Hanekawa. You didn't notice, did you?"

"—Ahaha."

An empty laugh from Hanekawa. Her eyes had gone past drowsy into becoming hollow.

A vacantness that she'd obstinately protected.

"Araragi-kun, was that also something you wanted to try saying?"

"No."

I shook my head. I turned away from Hanekawa.

Although I felt like I'd been turned away this whole time.

"That was something I regretted as soon as I said it."

And it wasn't just in the past.

Even now, in the present tense, I'm regretting it.

009

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line for this case.

Because my sisters came out of the bath at the same time we finished the dishes, we had to leave our not-so-meaningless conversation unfinished, and after returning to a child's mindset and holding a pajama party for an hour (even I'd been forced to change), Hanekawa left the Araragi household behind—no.

She wasn't Hanekawa Tsubasa.

She wasn't the Hanekawa Tsubasa I knew, and she wasn't the Hanekawa Tsubasa that I didn't know.

After that, I met up with Mitome-san who had finished up her escort duties and confirmed with her—whether or not Hanekawa had tried at all to slip away from the hotel that she had been confined to.

Whether or not the hotel suite had turned into a skin she had shed.

The symbol of peace and the worldwide person of importance known as "TSUBASA HANEKAWA" had continuously been in her room working to erase her personal history—signing her name, stamping her seal, and disposing of various documents. She'd been absorbed in putting her entire self through the shredder. She hadn't taken a step outside her room, and Japan's perfect escort was something to be proud of—they'd fully protected the person of importance, and they'd fully protected others from the person of importance.

But then, what did that mean?

If Mitome-san had not been a part of the escort, then I would have allowed for the possibility that "there was a gap that at least a single cat could crawl through", but in this case, even a wolf was involved. A wolf had encircled her. For Hanekawa who only knew "what she knew", it was hard to believe that she'd inferred the existence of werewolves in advance and set up countermeasures… If Hanekawa had truly slipped away from her hotel, met up with Tsukihi, and visited the Araragi household, then there was no way that Mitome-san would not have caught on.

Even if she didn't know her scent, she would've pursued her.

If you told me that "Hanekawa" had "slipped away to come here", then I would end up thinking she did "slip away to come here" in some way or another, but if Mitome-san said that she was "there", then the symbol of peace must have been "there" at the hotel this whole time—she would not have made even a hint of attempting to escape.

And, finishing up the length of her stay while under strict protection, she left Japan behind, exceedingly safely and exceedingly peacefully.

The destination of her plane had been kept secret.

She'd erased all her traces—she'd erased her past, as well as her present.

And disappeared from the world.

"I don't get it at all. How'd she do it? I'm glad you're trustin' me, but it doesn't change the fact that Hanekawa Tsubasa appeared at your house, right?"

"Yes. Like Schrodinger's cat. Like it was dead and alive at the same time—she was both here and there at the same time, in some quantum sort of way. But something like a physics-based superposition explanation would be a really stupid conclusion in a mystery novel."

There was a body double playing her role.

That was how I explained it to Mitome-san—as an apology for my careless declaration that there was "zero possibility", it was the only truth that I could think of.

"She'd sent in a perfect lookalike over to my house, while she herself stayed at the hotel busy doing paperwork."

"A perfect lookalike… There's no way. Those things only happen in mystery novels, right? If anything, I'd rather figure out how the escape room trick works."

"It's the simplest escape room trick. While she herself stays within the box, a different person pretends to escape—that's the most logical solution. If she had actually escaped and had been noticed, it would've caused an uproar too terrible to look at, after all—for the sake of maintaining the public order, Hanekawa staying at the hotel and pretending to escape was the best choice."

And it wasn't as easy as just slipping out.

She'd need to do something about the escape after a few hours, too—but in this case, while it was obvious that going back to the hotel was harder, she herself was already at the hotel without needing to go back.

"A lookalike—or I suppose we could call this a copycat. She even successfully deceived me. With cat food."[8]

"You really didn't need to go for that pun."

After starting with the minor flaw, she pointed out the real flaw, saying, "That's a little weird, isn't it?"

"Whether she did it successfully or with cat food, you yourself gettin' deceived is weird, Koyomi-kun. Even though you said all that before, because she's a celebrity of sorts, Hanekawa Tsubasa's treated as a taboo in being covered by the media, and there are no photos of

her out there, so I'd get it if we were the ones getting deceived—but Koyomi-kun, you're someone who knows the reality of her teenage years that she's erased, so there's no way you'd be deceived by a body double."

"Yes. I don't think that it's possible for me to mistake someone else for Hanekawa, either—no matter what form she completely changed to, no matter how different her hairstyle was, no matter how slightly her chest shrunk, no matter if she'd lost five kilograms, I'm confident that I'll absolutely be able to identify her."

"Yeah. I don't need all that about her chest. But keep going."

"But the preconditions have gone global. At best, my 'absolutely' is limited to within Japan—but Hanekawa Tsubasa has gone all over the world. There's no country she hasn't been in. The parameters are different. Even if she didn't have any friends—she knows seven billion people."

"……"

"They say that there are three other people in the world that look exactly like you."

That was also a kind of rumor, and thus our specialty.

And so it wasn't just folklore we could laugh about—realistically, there probably weren't any more than three people who'd have such a wide area of activities that they'd run into one of their lookalikes.

But Hanekawa Tsubasa was one of those three people.

And if there were plenty of people that were like Araragi Koyomi—then there were probably at least three people that were like Hanekawa Tsubasa.

"…If the one that visited your house was a copycat, Koyomi-kun, then what was their objective? Whether it was 'number one', or 'number two', regardless of the reason, didn't she just want to see you? But if the one you 'reunited' with was a body double, then that just flips over the whole premise.

"She didn't flip over at all. Because she's a cat. Because Hanekawa's objective was not to see me, but to gain entry into the Araragi household—it was just another thing on her agenda towards erasing all traces of her past."

"Erasing her past… And what does that mean?"

"Before I say any more, please let me apologize. I'm extremely sorry. I couldn't say anything because I was too embarrassed, but Mitome-san, I did have a present that I had gotten from Hanekawa that I took great care of all this time."

The truth was that it wasn't because I was "embarrassed" but because "I didn't want to be seen as a pervert", but the particulars didn't matter.

"And that was a present where, while I don't know about the scent, DNA analysis was possible…"

"Wait. What kind of a present is that? The heck? Tell me about that!"

"Hanekawa's objective was to dispose of all of those. And she succeeded."

On that day, when I came back from work, "Hanekawa Tsubasa" had been on the second floor—she'd been searching my room. She'd mercilessly disposed of the "presents" that I hadn't been sure what to do with.

Although, she probably recovered them to dispose of later.

She probably would've preferred to burn them on the spot, but since the objects were underwear and hair, I'm sure it would've been simple to just take them with her on her body—she could just put on the brassiere and shorts, and use the braids as extensions.

That was probably why she had had more black hair than usual in her striped hair—and if she could even fool my eyes, then it wouldn't be that difficult to slip through Karen's and Tsukihi's eyes as well.

Regardless, those precious keepsakes had disappeared from my room.

My memories had been lost.

"That was the 'number three' objective that she came to see me for. In the end, even though she'd declared that she was erasing her personal history as her official stance, that itself was the truth as well. That was her true intention, and chatting with me was just out of courtesy. She just said something appropriate for a reunion with her former classmate, making up something believable, while steadily accomplishing her 'number three' mission. Well, she could've accomplished it without coming to see me, but—"

"…Even if you're right, Araragi-kun. That doesn't necessarily mean the one who came to see you was the body double, does it?"

"Eh?"

"It's equally possible that the Hanekawa Tsubasa we were escorting was the body double, and the Hanekawa Tsubasa who came to see you was the real thing—and to go further, maybe her 'number three' objective was the pretense, and the 'number one' and 'number two' that you decided were fake were actually her true thoughts? No, no, I don't actually have any reasons for sayin' that. I just think that Hanekawa Tsubasa, for no real reason at all, just wanted to see her first love again."

"…That's surprisingly romantic of you, Mitome-san."

"I'm the Last Wolf, after all. That's obviously romantic."

"But the possibility of that is zero," I declared without any

lingering aftertaste.

For such a gray-area question with no black or white, I gave an immediate response.

It probably could be better to leave this riddle unsolved, leaving the main points vague, but let's make the answer not wilting flowers but flapping wings.

"Or rather, it's even possible that both of them were body doubles. If there are three people that look like you, then that leaves another lookalike on this Earth. It's possible that Hanekawa Tsubasa didn't even return to Japan."

When I opened the box, it was empty.

For the problem of whether the cat in the box was alive or dead, that would mean the cat hadn't been in the box in the first place —but I preferred that the most.

"Whaddya mean you prefer that? Doesn't it make you angry? If the person you were talkin' to was a body double, that just means Hanekawa Tsubasa was makin' a fool out of you! Isn't that why you tried testin' her?"

"That was something I wanted to let Hanekawa know. No matter how much I'd regret it afterwards."

"Being happy even if you met a copycat… That's kinda pitiful of you. Koyomi-kun, aren't you the romantic one here?"

"I won't deny it, but I'm not happy that I met a copycat. What I'm happy about is that Hanekawa even sent me a copycat… That she sent me an empty box."

Really, truly, and honestly, I was happy from the bottom of my heart—whether it was peace or saving people or her beliefs or the world, whatever she valued the most, whatever she strove to protect.

Because the person I was now had become just an inconsequential guy to the person that Hanekawa was now. And that made me the happiest of all.

Tsuzura Human

001

Kouga Tsuzura was, uniquely, the only human to be a part of the Rumors Squad—even though the squad boasted a lineup of dubious members that could perhaps be called a night parade of a hundred demons, the person at the top that spearheaded it was neither mermaid nor golem, neither werewolf nor vampire, but a pure human. But she herself didn't put on any airs, often saying, "I'm an impure human. Because I'm just a human," as she shrugged her shoulders; but, well, in this case, questioning the humanness of a human was really just philosophical. I hadn't asked Gaen-san why she'd chosen this person to be the leader, but there was probably a good meaning to putting a human in charge of police officers mixed in with oddities, and in charge of an official squad that dealt with oddities before they became oddities.

A pure, or perhaps an impure, human.

In the end, Gaen-san's project of "going from just a fragment to an official group" or "going from just a unit to an entire organization" was still in progress.

Though I'd taken up my training at the Naoetsu Police Department due to my communication skills with an oddity, Kouga Tsuzura had most likely been elected as the key figure of the Rumors Squad due to her communication skills with other people. When it came down to it, if the Rumors Squad was unable to negotiate on an equivalent level with humans, in both a good way and a bad way, then the existence of the squad itself could end up becoming just another rumor.

So this was probably a countermeasure for something like that.

An equivalent countermeasure.[9]

That's why Kouga Tsuzura wasn't even a specialist.

She had not even one skill she specialized in.

She had no technique where she could universally negotiate with oddities like Oshino Meme, and she couldn't do anything like swindle people through the use of oddities like Kaiki Deishuu. She wasn't an *onmyouji* that could beat up immortal oddities like Kagenui Yozuru, and she did not own a shikigami that was like Ononoki Yotsugi. She couldn't even cross between this world and the next using dolls like Teori Tadatsuru—and of course, she didn't know everything like Gaen Izuko did.

She could not see the form of any oddity, hear the voice of any oddity, be able to touch any oddity, or be affected by any oddity. She could not interact with oddities in any way.

That was the purity of a pure human—or perhaps the impurity

of an impure human. But in other words, she remained wholly untouched by any oddity.

She probably didn't even have any guardian angels or guardian spirits.

She'd probably never even received fortune-telling that had been correct.

And she'd never gone wrong—she was always "not quite right, but not far from the mark".

That's why she could be put in charge of a mermaid or golem or werewolf.

She was unable to be influenced, and she was especially unable to be negatively influenced—it was because she'd come this far without any ties to the supernatural that she'd taken command of the Rumors Squad.

A government official who could impartially come into contact with fantasy or the occult without investment or bias—for a world that was so strange and mysterious, it turned out that a person like that was unexpectedly valuable.

Because it was Gaen-san, I was sure that she'd been elated when she discovered such a person of talent (and undoubtedly a *person* of talent). Because she was "an onee-san that knew everything", she was certainly aware that she'd met "an onee-san that didn't know anything".

She would have been thoroughly aware of her.

Ignorance could certainly be considered a crime, but it was also true that knowledge could bring fear.

And because the Rumors Squad was a squad dedicated to eliminating fear, we definitely couldn't be the bringers of fear.

We couldn't let any rumors turn into a storm.

A breeze that softly caressed your cheek was best.

002

So, if we were in a police drama, then it could almost be considered an established pattern for some huge incident to occur, just as my four-month-long training period was about to come to a close. But it seemed that I would be finishing my work at the Naoetsu Police Department without anything in particular happening—of course, the duties of the Rumors Squad fundamentally meant that most of our concerns were "nothing happening".

In exchange, a huge incident had occurred in my private life. You could even call it a serious accident. It helped that it had been a disaster I'd experienced twice before, but there did exist a rather unpleasant maxim in the world that went "third time's the charm". Even though it included such a nice-sounding word like "charm", how did this maxim have such an unpleasant ring to it?

I broke up with Senjougahara Hitagi. For the third time.

Why? Well, it was true that my feelings of ingratitude had come through during my stay at my hometown, because, in a way, I'd spent my days in a far more misanthropic way than I'd done as a student—I hadn't even ended up visiting the Kitashirahebi Shrine for my first shrine visit of the year. Because I was a coward—but even so, I'd at least made sure not to neglect communicating regularly with Hitagi.

I'd followed Suou-san's advice.

I'd sent text messages and even called her. International phone calls. I'd even signed up for a plan that made overseas calls cheaper, and we regularly updated each other on recent events. With the two of us being separated by just a smidgen of an ocean, these four months had yielded the most intimate communication from our relationship—almost like a honeymoon.

But perhaps that was actually a bad thing.

We'd inadvertently ended up broaching the subject of our future plans.

It was the height of foolishness.

But the end of my training period had been in sight, and I'd finished my final one-on-one meeting with Chief Kouga, so I'd needed to start preparing for what I'd do after I left the Naoetsu Police Department behind. And, in Hitagi's case, because she'd been an junior financial trader to a huge company, the time had come for her to decide whether or not to aim for an official manager position—as an overseas enterprise that went by the merit system, promotions came surprisingly fast, so for someone who grew up watching her father, this was something she needed to discuss.

Compared to Hanekawa, whose activities were on a global level, the scope of our problems was a little different. But if Hitagi planned on putting her base of operations overseas, then it would get extremely difficult for her to spend time with me, a government official.

Some sort of decision needed to be made.

A severe decision, without much room to negotiate.

To be frank, it was actually rather thrilling to watch Hitagi progress in her work… She'd never clearly boasted about it herself, but it seemed she was valued rather highly by her superiors, so I couldn't exactly bring up to her, "Why don't you come back?" in a lighthearted manner.

Though I'd be happy if she did come back to me, it was Hitagi's life. Not mine. It wasn't the life of Araragi Koyomi, who could not even get his way even in his own life.

It was something for Hitagi to decide.

But that indecisive attitude was what actually incurred her wrath, as we had a huge fight for the first time in a while—it had been so long that we'd forgotten how to even have a fight, so both of us had failed to control ourselves.

It was a mess. It was absolutely crazy.

Had it been the past, I probably would have meekly compromised on the matter, but the reason I didn't do that this time was, most likely, because I'd had pent-up feelings on my end as well.

Although I wouldn't go so far as to call it a grudge.

I'd even considered a path in which I'd give up on the path of becoming a police officer. Because I'd taken the civil service exam with such a light reason as "because my parents were police officers", I'd considered wildly flying the flag of rebellion against the country I'd sworn loyalty to and going off on a trip overseas where Hitagi lived—although, even Hitagi had gotten into the same trade (but a different company) as her father because of his influence.

Though she was on the complete opposite vector from me due to her working at a rival company to her father, our roots were still pretty similar.

But I couldn't lie to myself that I hadn't realized that the work of the Rumors Squad was something worth doing—that's right, being able to work with colleagues that had also decided to live their lives together with oddities within them was something that was completely fresh to me, an experience I'd never had before.

Having an open workplace had become comfortable for me.

And I even felt that my hopeless personality was suited to the duties that mainly involved dealing with rumors spread by kids before they ended up turning serious—I even felt like I was getting to redo

the various things I'd failed at in middle school and high school.

It felt like I'd gotten a little bit of the compensation I thought I'd never get.

"Assistant Inspector Araragi. You're the one who decides your future, not me or Gaen-senpai. All Gaen-senpai can do is give you the experience of being in the Rumors Squad—the rest is left for you to decide."

You're the one who decides.

Chief Kouga had spoken to me in that manner in our last meeting.

She'd used a calm tone of voice, as if trying to calm my nerves.

"If you truly desire to tackle white-collar crime in the future, then I'm not unwilling to write you a letter of recommendation—to put it plainly, you're more than capable. No matter where you're assigned, I'm sure you'll be able to carry out your duties properly. Personally, I'd want you to one day take over my seat, and, no kidding, it would be ideal if you could even become the chief of the department. But I don't necessarily think life is about pursuing ideals. Though Gaen-senpai thinks differently from me, it doesn't matter to me whether you have the abilities or special characteristics."

Chief Kouga pointed at my shadow as she said that—it was rather fearless to point a finger at a shadow in which a legendary vampire resided, but she truly had no fear—that's why such a feat was possible.

And that's why she was able to give me those instructions.

"You don't necessarily have to become anything like that. It's fine to just live while taking it easy."

…If she had instead tried to preach to me about the principles or the lofty goals of the Rumors Squad's founders here, it might have ironically made me want to stay less, but the words she said actually made me feel like I wanted to continue in this line of work for a little bit longer—although I was well aware that that was my boss's skill.

It's fine to just live while taking it easy.

If I was ten years older, I wonder if I could've said that to Hanekawa.

Like that, I was not making plans for my future after the end of my training period, but asking myself whether or not I should escape from this country. Although the one that had been more urgently asking was Hitagi. Or maybe she had just wanted me to tell her, "Come back to me".

But if I did say that, it would have turned into another fight.

And so we decided to break up. For the third time. Well, it was the third time that we actually broke up, but as for similar destructive fights, we had had too many to count in college—but if I said it like

that, then, to those older than me, it would probably sound like some kind of push-pull relationship, and they'd probably say that everyone has had periods like that in their lives.

On the other hand, anyone younger would probably want to say to just go and end such a messy relationship already, but for future reference, I'd like you all to know that this will likely happen to you, too.

It's already a miracle if, with your girlfriend that you started dating in high school, you can stay as lovers all the way to your college graduation (even if there were some breaks along the way).

So I felt that I didn't want to lose that miracle. But those kinds of "it would be such a waste" feelings shouldn't control Hitagi's future —and they shouldn't control mine, either.

I didn't want to end things in regret. And I didn't want to continue things in regret, either.

"Ah… Araragi. Why the hell are you here…"

That was what I wanted to say.

Well, no, for a line that sounded like it was spoken to someone who was supposed to be dead, it wasn't something I could say—it was unmistakably something that Oikura Sodachi should say.

After all these years, I'd once again fallen into a chance encounter with my childhood friend that I'd broken ties with. Once again.

How many more times in my life would I break ties and then reunite with her?

The location was Town Hall.

In preparation for leaving the Rumors Squad, I'd entered the stage of transferring the duties I'd been tasked with. Part of that was submitting various documents, so I'd gone to each section of Town Hall on my own—it was something akin to the work Hanekawa had done when she was erasing her personal history, but in any case, to my surprise, I found Oikura working at one of the positions.

She'd tied up her hair and put on glasses, working with an expression that made her look like a proper accountant—well, I did know that she'd been studying as much in college, so she certainly was a proper accountant, but even so, she looked more like she was performing the role of an accountant in a play.

To the point that it left me dumbfounded when I stood at the window to submit my documents… Eh? How do you have a job here like this? And not to mention in your hometown, in a government job among government jobs, said to be tougher than the police—

"I… I was worried about you. I was wondering if you'd be out on the streets somewhere by now, Oikura…"

"Don't cast me out on the streets to your own benefit. You wanna die?"

Even though she looked like an accountant, it seemed her personality hadn't changed much—well, just to me, at least. I see, so after she graduated from college, she came back here to her hometown—hmm.

Although, if she took the civil service exam after that… I guess she loved studying no matter how old she got.

"What, Araragi? You became a police officer…? An assistant inspector? A career man? Compared to me, in the local government, you're working for the national government? Why, why are you always one step ahead of me…"

"Um, it's not like I was trying to be one step ahead of you…

And in terms of the qualifications needed to be an accountant, I was the one that failed."

To tell the truth about that, we'd crammed for the exam together. For a certain reason, I'd failed, although it was a long story. Well, to be frank, my mathematical skills had collapsed before I'd turned twenty—though the term mathematician may be too extreme, as Oikura had managed to get the qualifications to become an accountant, I honestly considered her the victor in the mathematics race.

"Heh. I wouldn't even mind calling you Euler, now, if you want."

"Don't mess with me. I cut ties with you two years ago on October 13th, didn't I? Don't try to build it back up little by little. I despise you."

"Whoa, whoa. It's not like I came here to invade your workplace. …Do you want to get lunch together? There's something I want to get your advice on."

"Sure, I'll hear you out. You can wait over there until lunchtime."

Though she sounded like she was trying to start a fight, she accepted.

In a way, she was someone that it was useless to cut ties with… I see, haven't I technically broken up with Oikura more than Senjougahara Hitagi, my girlfriend?

It was impossible to hide my surprise that such a coincidence had occurred. But if I thought about it, since we'd both grown up in this town, and since Oikura had likely been working at Town Hall since our college graduation, there had probably been a lot of chances for the two of us to meet during my training period, both of us being public servants.

I'd found myself at Town Hall dozens of times over the past four months for various reasons—perhaps we'd passed each other in the hallway without noticing. No matter how low the probability was, with this many chances, we would eventually have met—that was also something based on mathematics.

Considering that the probability of running into Oikura was overall higher than running into Kanbaru at the hospital, I could even say that reuniting with her just before I was about to leave town occurred later than it should have.

Whether it was fate or not.

Fortunately, I had a mountain of other documents to submit at other sections until Oikura's break—though I didn't remember up to the exact date, it would be around two years since I'd last eaten lunch with her.

It was a long story, but it would be the first time “since that one case”.

Simply put, the first time since Hitagi and I first broke up—or, strictly speaking, was it since the second time?

The third time I reunited with Oikura was in a college classroom. I’d wondered what sort of strange twist of fate this was, but it turned out that it was one of Hanekawa’s arrangements—it seemed Hanekawa had been concerned for Oikura in various ways, even after she’d transferred out of Naoetsu High. In one way or another, she’d encouraged Oikura to move onto college—and while Oikura’s academic abilities exceeded mine overall, the selection of colleges with mathematics departments was small. So, to put it bluntly, our third reunion was also inevitable, in a sense.

While I’d been commuting to college from my parents’ house, Oikura had been looking for a place to stay. She’d been having a lot of trouble, as she couldn’t pay rent and didn’t know any guarantors—and when I let my parents know, “Then call her over to our house,” were the instructions I was given.

I hadn’t broken out of my rebellious phase just yet, so I couldn’t just follow those instructions.

But I half-acknowledged that it was different from when we were in elementary school, and I couldn’t just leave a troubled Oikura alone, seeing as I still felt like I owed something to her—I knew she’d fight back against me (that is, refuse) if I asked her directly, so I took the roundabout way of getting my sisters to invite her. And thus, for the first time in seven years, Oikura ended up living at the Araragi household.

That was when we’d studied accounting together.

It was our first study group in a while—but it was soon discovered by Hitagi-san.

I had thought it was barely safe to allow a childhood friend, one that I had no interest in as a member of the opposite sex, a place to stay at my house, but it seemed to Hitagi that this was totally out of the question.

No, I was definitely wrong in this case. There wasn’t anything more wrong than this. It was the worst blunder I’d committed at the end of my teenage years.

Of course it would lead to our first breakup.

It was thanks to Oikura that we were somehow able to repair that relationship—it was Oikura that went to great efforts to get Hitagi and I back together again. That is, her efforts actually meant threatening Hitagi and I by saying, “If you don’t make up, I’ll jump off from here and kill myself”, and there was also some cooperation with Hanekawa, who’d been a “ordinary celebrity” at the time (she was just

a volunteering girl and not yet an activist), to mediate between us.

She'd immediately left the Araragi household, too.

Hitagi, who hadn't been perturbed by the threat of suicide, still ended up feeling guilty at having taken away a working student's place of residence, and though we didn't immediately repair our relationship from that, it still gave us a chance to meet and talk things out.

In the end, Hitagi and I returned to normal, and we were able to carry on with our fun campus life for a bit, together with Oikura—it really was fun, at least until our second breakup occurred.

Our second breakup.

We'd broken up for an extremely stupid reason.

And, probably because she felt that the do-or-die efforts that she rarely showed to others had gone to waste, there was no one angrier at this breakup than Oikura.

Or, rather than being angry, she may have just been disappointed.

And though I'd managed to reconcile with Hitagi after that, we never once exchanged words with Oikura on campus until our graduation.

That was the fourth time we'd cut ties.

We'd moved on from college with a bad aftertaste left in our mouths, and had little reason to learn what had happened to Oikura after that—until this very day.

She's just working normally, isn't she!?

Well, I hadn't actually thought that she'd be out on the streets… But I was still relieved.

This was something I just had to tell Hitagi about—was what I'd started to think, before I remembered that I was in a huge fight with Hitagi at the moment.

We were in the middle of our third breakup.

I guess…. I should probably… tell Oikura, huh.

Shit, why did we have to meet at the exact time I broke up with Hitagi? All these bad things that occurred recently really felt very "Oikura Sodachi"-like—although, I shouldn't be blaming everything on Oikura.

"Thanks for waiting. Let's go, Araragi. I put aside exactly thirty minutes to deal with you."

"Well, thank you very much. Is there a place you usually go for lunch? I don't really know this area too well."

"What a disgrace. Even though it's your hometown."

"Well, all the sights are completely different from how they used to be. They've built shopping malls and stuff. C'mon, I'll treat you."

"I'd rather die than have you treat me to a meal."

So she still said stuff like that even at the age of twenty-three… Maybe it was too early to feel relieved about her, but in any case, as we were both employed, I was fine with splitting the bill.

Oikura led the way into a cafe by the Town Hall. I'd thought that it was a place she frequented due to the reasonable prices, but it turned out that it was her first time coming here.

"I don't want to bring you anywhere I go frequently," she said.

She really hates me, huh?

I prayed that this was a place that Oikura wanted to visit from a while back but found it hard to come alone—and, betting on that possibility, allowed her to choose what to order.

"So. What? What do you want? From me. From someone of my caliber."

"Er, well, I was thinking I'd apologize for what happened two years ago—but that's not really it."

"Of course it isn't."

"To be honest, I didn't think you'd cut ties with me over that much, back then… But I invited you out to lunch because I was surprised. To see that you were still alive… I mean, to see that you were working at the town hall."

"Don't get all surprised to see that I'm still alive. Why would I be dead?"

"Why would you be dead… From the bottom of my heart, it makes me extremely happy to hear you say that."

"Hmph. Well, it's not like I made a U-turn back here because I loved this place so much. It's not like I really consider this my 'hometown' in the first place… Since I moved around a lot. And I don't have any good memories at all," said Oikura. "But when I decided that I was going to become an adult from now on, that I was going to become a member of society, then I could only think of one person as my role model."

Role model.

In my case, it was my parents. But for Oikura, her parents were not those kinds of parents—in fact, she most likely had a strong desire to *not* become like those adults.

However, if there were any other adults… She didn't even admire any teachers from school. If you took into account the circumstances of why she stopped attending, school was not a fun place for her at all.

After thinking as much, I suddenly understood.

"Ah, I see. When you were living in that apartment, you were looked after by that Town Hall employee, right? Even after you transferred out of Naoetsu High… That's why."

"Don't make me out to be so simple. I resent that."

She'll get mad no matter what I say.

She could hardly be considered an adult as she was now.

Was it too early for her to have gone out in society?

"For the record, and I'll just say it outright, I don't have the tiniest bit of any kind of admirable desire to care for kids so that they don't turn pitiful like me. This is just for my own self-help."

"Why would you intentionally go out of your way to say something so unlikable…"

What an easy-to-understand *tsundere*.

Well, a tsundere past the age of twenty was really just a nuisance… but I couldn't help but think about how much easier it would be if Hitagi was this easy to understand.

"Haaah. If only I was in love with you, instead."

"What's with those utterly repulsive words? Go die, and then apologize for ruining my mood. By the way, I'm constantly thinking about how I'm glad that I hate you."

It seems that she could be honest at times. When she's hating me, at least.

But anyway, it was good that she had a mostly steady reason for her steady job.

I wondered if she'd ever met back up with the Town Hall employee that had been in charge of the Oikura household—it would be wonderful if that would bring forth a teacher-student relationship, but it was probably a bit intrusive to ask something like that.

I'll save it for next time.

"Where do you live now?"

"And why do you want to know my address? What are you trying to do to me?"

"Don't be so obviously suspicious of me. I don't know about now, but after you left the Araragi household, didn't you constantly move from place to place? What, will you die if you don't keep moving?"

"You got a problem with that? I was desperately trying to keep you and Senjougahara and Hanekawa-san from tracking me down."

"If you ask me if I have a problem with that, and *that's* your reason, then yeah, I do have a problem. …And you, of all people, add 'san' to only Hanekawa's name, huh?"

"You can't refer to 'TSUBASA HANEKAWA' without honorifics, after all. …Last month, even Town Hall was in a huge uproar."

"Really? Well, that makes sense."

In fact, it was probably more hectic for Town Hall than it was for the police.

They'd be the ones to handle all the procedures.

“Did Hanekawa ever come to visit you?”

“No. When I broke off ties with you two, I did the same with Hanekawa-san, too.”

“Well, it’s another thing entirely to be involved with her now.”

“She probably doesn’t even remember me anymore. Why do you say that?”

“Never miiind. I’m just jealous that you could cleanly cut her off like that.”

Although it didn’t seem like she forgot about you. She probably even knew about Oikura working at Town Hall and was just playing dumb.

“So, Oikura. Where do you live now? What place are you renting out?”

“Don’t be so stubborn about my address. Are you planning on burning my place down? I’m calling the police.”

“Although I am a policeman. If you want, I’ll set up a police box near your place.”

“Don’t do anything unnecessary.”

“I can actually put in a request for an officer at a police box to do a focused patrol. My connections are worth that much.”

“What, to protect me? Or to keep an eye on me?”

“I’m sincerely worried about you.”

“Shut up. Make all your cardiopulmonary functions stop working.”

In spite of her abusive language, it seemed that it got through to her that my concern actually was sincere, as she told me that she wasn’t renting.

“I bought a place. With a government employee loan. They say purchasing a house is better in the long run.”

“……”

Was that really okay?… No, wait, it’s way too premature to decide that…

In the debate between whether renting or buying was better, both sides had their reasons so I couldn’t really say either way, but when I heard that Oikura had bought a house (especially with a loan), it completely got rid of any impression of steadiness I got from her. But I’ll hear her out to the end.

It may end up that I’d have to cooperate with her not just as a childhood friend but also as a police officer, but I’d do anything for Oikura… As long as this idiot was happy…

“What… What kind of property did you buy?”

“It was like a haunted house that was mostly run-down, so it was fairly cheap… It’s all right, no need to stand up. It’s already been properly renovated.”

“I don’t know if you know about them, but nowadays there are these things called ‘renovation scams’…”

“Don’t treat me like I’m the biggest fool in the world. It’s a place you know about, too. It’s the house I lived in when I was in middle school.”

“……”

That—I did know about. A place I visited dozens of times.

The place where Oikura and I had spent our quietest years—for Oikura, they were certainly some of her most turbulent years, but I see, she decided to purchase that house.

If it was in that state, then even someone in their early twenties could easily afford it. Or rather, to put it clearly, she was resolving the problem of a vacant house as a member of Town Hall—which was perhaps even good enough to be granted a bonus.

Although renovation didn’t exactly sound easy…

“Regardless, you’re the same as ever, hurting yourself like this… How is this self-help? You’re just returning to where you started from. Do you really like going back to square one that much?”

“I’m the opposite of ‘TSUBASA HANEKAWA’. I’m going to live by taking back my past.”

Oikura Sodachi spoke as if making a vow.

“I’ll paint over my memories in my own colors. I’ll build a new family in that house. Although unfortunately, I don’t have a partner yet—that reminds me, Araragi. How’s it going with you and Senjougahara these days?”

“Well, if you want to keep your remodeling costs down, you can call me. We can do our best with DIY stuff to get it down cheaply. It might sound a bit shameless for me to say this, but I do have a lot of memories in that place. I’d like to leave a bit of my own color there, too.”

“Don’t try to so shamelessly avoid the question. Didn’t you two come back here together?”

“You seem to be under a misunderstanding, but I haven’t exactly returned definitively to my hometown yet. It’s just for my training period…”

“Do you think I’ve forgotten how to use this fork?”

And she tightly gripped the cutlery in her hand—I had the feeling I was going to learn exactly how she was going to use that fork.

I guess there’s no choice. The time had come for me to tell her.

Though I’d been able to sort of bring good vibes to the conversation through reminiscing in spite of our unexpected reunion, I wasn’t sure if she’d cut ties with me after I told her, but I knew that it wouldn’t be good if I didn’t tell her properly… I told Oikura

everything about my present situation, Hitagi's present situation, and our present situation.

The three of us, who had at one point been a trio, had all but fallen apart now—and as expected, when Oikura heard all of it, she held up her fork like a dart, pointed it at me, and… didn't throw it at me.

Instead, she laughed, "You're so dumb," as if she was amazed—almost as if she was enjoying it.

Well, if this ended just with her exposing the bad side of her personality and not with her cutting ties with me once again, then I was glad.

Perhaps it helped to highlight the fact that it was a completely different reason from when we broke up the first time because of Oikura. Because she hated when something was her responsibility.

I knew my childhood friend's personality very well.

"But really, it's like that, isn't it? Something so run-of-the-mill. Surprisingly, couples seem to break up more not when they go to college but when they get jobs. Upupu."

"Hey, a laugh that can hardly be considered human is leaking out."

"Didn't you two discuss this? When you were job hunting. If one side is aiming to work overseas, and the other is aiming to work as a government official, then it should have been obvious that you two would end up going in separate ways."

"Miraculously enough, we decided at the time to cheer for each other. And just like that, she was charging on ahead getting qualifications in the finance industry. I wanted her to get a job where she could use that to the fullest."

"What a progressive mindset. I would also cheer for any woman who chooses to work. No matter how much that woman spreading her wings overseas looks down on me for returning to my hometown."

"I don't think she looks down on you, though… She was also worried about you, you know? About what happened to you after graduation."

"She was probably just curious about if I'd been left on the streets."

"Well, I can't deny that."

"Deny it, will you!"

And after being laughed at for quite some time by Oikura (she sure is something), she finally asked, "…But, what are you planning on doing?" as if showing a bit of concern for me.

It's too late to react like that now.

And it was only a bit. And she was still half-smirking.

“In the end, isn’t it a pretty lethal thing to fight over? With the way things are now, it just seems like either you or Senjougahara will have to quit their job and change where they are. So? What’ll it be, what’ll it be?”

“Don’t say it like you’re trying to corner me. If you’re assisting with citizens’ needs like that, you’d be a terrible government worker.”

“Oh, please, ‘citizens’? And don’t worry. Even like this I can properly keep my public and private lives separate. Hello, thank you for waiting! How may I be of assistance?”

“Wow, the difference is amazing.”

If she can do a proper customer service smile, then I’ll approve.

“If only you would quit your job and move overseas and *then* break up catastrophically…”

“Hey, your secret desires are leaking out.”

“I’m making sure my wish doesn’t come true by telling it to someone else.”

“Telling your wish to the person in question just makes you unbearable.”[10]

Well, there was no need to emphasize it again. It was a situation where we couldn’t just reconcile halfheartedly—no matter what, a critical decision was necessary.

“If only you two just broke up forever.”

“Just stop wishing for anything about me. Don’t even wish me well.”

“If I had to say it, Araragi, Senjougahara’s path sounds pretty clearly decided, while yours seems pretty uncertain. As for what you want to do… Will you return to your hometown, or will you launch yourself to the big city? Since you’re working for the national government, if you’re thinking within all of Japan, your footing isn’t really solid, yet, right? I’m just a local government employee, so it’s easy for me to decide to just plant my roots here. And I bought a house and all.”

After having bought assets and having become a property owner, she sure was acting like she was above me… Well, to be honest, it was surprising to see that Oikura was in a much more solid situation than I’d expected.

Although, unlike with Kanbaru, I didn’t get the feeling that she’d gotten ahead of me.

“In that case, I can see why you think it’d be better for me to be the one to move overseas.”

“No. I think it would be better if you died.”

“It’s a shame that I really enjoy talking with you. Should I come visit Town Hall every day after this?”

“If you do that, I’ll abuse my authority and have your personal

history be erased."

"Don't actually abuse your authority like that. Although rather than abusive (ranyou), you're deranged (ranshin).[11] On a regular basis."

"Can I be serious with you for a moment? My wish is for you to move overseas, break up catastrophically, and then be left out in the streets in some foreign country."

"Rather than being serious, this has actually gotten rather severe. That is, your personality."

"If I'm going to grit my teeth and seriously consider your futures, then I can only say that you're going to have to take care not to get caught up in any transient emotions. Like when you took pity on me and made me live with you."

"…That's right."

If I wrote a letter of resignation, it wasn't unlikely that Hitagi would use that as a reason to break up with me.

Though she wasn't as thorny as she was as a teenager, she was still a close friend of Hanekawa's, and thus a girl with strong convictions.

"Although, for someone like her, if you talk to her in a reasonable manner, Araragi, then I don't think she'd be reluctant to return to Japan and get a job in her hometown. She's a girl that's starved for affection, after all."

"That's an awful way of putting it. But I don't want her to quit her job because of me. I feel like it would be terrible for the world at large if we allowed something like that to happen."

"That's a very government-official-like way of putting it. You want to set an example for the world? In that case, Araragi, if you decided to go out on the streets for Senjougahara's sake, wouldn't that also set a bad example?"

"Don't try to force me out on the streets at all costs. It's like you're doing everything you can to put me there! At least let me get a job overseas! I can even stay with my sister at first."

"That's a super lame thing to say… But anyway, regardless of whatever the world thinks, you should really think about Senjougahara for her sake. Because she's not 'TSUBASA HANEKAWA'—hm? Thinking about it, if she erased her past, then even that name shouldn't be valid anymore… What should we call that honors student from now on?"

"Well, she is a cat. We can just say, 'as yet she has no name'—or I suppose 'no longer does she have a name'. But if I think about Senjougahara for her sake, I can't exactly tell her that I want her to come back to Japan."

"Then you can just break up."

Her words felt like a slap to the face.

Oikura wasn't saying this with the intention of trying to hurt my feelings or punish me—she was just stating the obvious in an obvious manner.

Those words could even be spoken as an employee of Town Hall.

"Well, regardless of whatever either you or Senjougahara decides to do about your job or career, the fact of the matter is that neither of you are kids."

"Neither of us are kids, huh? Well, that's for sure."

A twenty-three-year-old that didn't care about his partner would be better off just breaking up then and there. In my teenage years I would've thought it would be hypocritical to break up with someone for their sake, now that I've gotten to this point, I can't say that I agree completely.

"Considering she spent the best parts of her youth on you, it would be criminal to have her sacrifice her twenties, too. Just saying."

Oikura pulled out her cell phone—and, after tapping on the screen, she held it out to me.

On the screen was her address book.

It was apparently a request to go ahead and put in my personal information… So cutting ties for the fourth time was officially canceled.

"Don't make any decisions right now, okay? Because that would just make me feel responsible. Just make a follow-up report. I'd like to laugh like this again. One smile, please, my personal Mr. Clown."

"……"

"What? I can abuse my authority to collect all your personal information, anyway. Do you want me to become a criminal?"

"Of course I don't. But I can't help that I can very clearly envision a future where I'm putting you in handcuffs. I want to send in a letter of resignation to avoid that."

"For the record, it'll be better if you don't use my opinion as a reference. Like I said before, it's not like I have a partner."

And after that, Oikura suddenly spoke as if she thought of something.

Her words were like a surprise attack.

"Maybe… if both of us are still single when we hit our thirties…"

"Then?"

"Let's strangle each other to death."

What a lovely proposal. If that meant I'd get to quarrel with her all the way to my thirties.

And with that, I headed towards the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

And if you're asking "with what?", then not even I really had a clue, but I'd finally come up with the determination to go—I wanted to say that I'd managed to overcome something after talking to Oikura, but she'd probably hate me if I said that. So let's just say that I had no choice but to go mountain climbing because I was pressed for time.

I completed the rest of my work in the afternoon and headed directly for the mountain that the Kitashirahebi Shrine was built on—how long ago had I last climbed this mountain, anyway? Back when I'd visited the place frequently, January meant lots of snow piling up, making it an extremely tough climb that made me feel awful just remembering it. But perhaps due to a change in the climate after so many years, the snow wasn't at a point where I'd slip and fall from it.

Let's see.

Would I, the way I was now, still be able to see Hachikuji Mayoi?

It wasn't like she was some kind of fairy that you were unable to see when you became an adult (at the very least, Gaen-san was able to see her; and in contrast, Chief Kouga probably wouldn't have been able to see her no matter how young she was), so thinking about it, I might have been agonizing over this for the wrong reasons—I could even say that, because I was troubled over various other things, I was simply jumping to conclusions.

It was like I was some young maiden that was afraid to approach the boy he liked out of fear of being rejected. It was hard to say that I was truly an adult man, if I did say so myself…

But it wasn't like I'd lost all hope.

Though she was a god enshrined in the Kitashirahebi Shrine as of now, if we went back to her roots, Hachikuji Mayoi was a lost snail—a ghost that could only be seen by humans that didn't want to return home.

A ghost that made people stray from the path that led back home.

There was probably no other person in this town that was better than me at losing their way, whether it was coming or going. After all, I'd more or less been unable to decide my path, my future, in every meaning possible.

I couldn't even see a glimpse of where I'd end up.

While I wasn't exactly lost out on the streets, I'd certainly lost my way.

In that sense, this could be the best timing, even better than the year's first shrine visit, to go and pay my respects to the Kitashirahebi Shrine—and then.

"…Of course."

Even when I passed under the *torii*, entered the grounds, walked up the road, and reached the main shrine—the shrine at night was completely devoid of anyone. There was not a soul in sight, with neither a cat, nor a snake, and certainly not a snail to be seen.

Not even footprints had been left in the thin layer of snow that had piled up. Perhaps the snow was even absorbing sound, because it felt even more silent than I thought was realistically possible.

When I'd first visited this shrine, it had been abandoned, making it the perfect spot for a trial of guts. It was the same with Oikura's house, so now that I thought about it, perhaps I was a guy that liked playing in ruins.

But it became a spot for a real trial of guts—a real trial of the heart—after it was reformed. I couldn't even count the number of times my body had been used to mop the floors when I came here.

And at the very end of it all, I'd fallen to hell.

It seemed the shrine was under reliable management by now, but the fact that five years had passed was almost palpable… Although maybe I was only thinking that because it was dark. Although I could still compare with when there had been a starry sky —was it here that I'd gone stargazing once before?

Well, even if I said that, this wasn't really a place to come at night… Whether it was for a trial of guts or for stargazing, anyone who came to such an unpopular place this late was not in their right mind.

Good grief.

Perhaps I'd just hit a dead end after losing my way.

As I thought that, I pulled out some spare change from my wallet and tossed it into the offertory box. A five-yen coin. Fundamentally, in these cases, was it two bows, two claps, and then a third bow?

"Have you become ready to die?"

Said a voice.

When I was thinking about what to pray for, a voice spoke from my snow-covered shadow—and it wasn't just a voice speaking, as a little blonde girl emerged with a wriggle from my shadow. Because even the light of the stars and the white of the snow managed

to produce a shadow, it had connected the hotline from Shinobu to me.

It was almost like looking for service at the peak of a mountain with just how barely the connection was made… Shinobu had taken on a form with a fluffy knit hat, a bulky coat that made her resemble a snowman, and boots with fur.

This girl had also gotten influenced by worldliness.

Even though in the past, no matter how freezing the world was outside, she'd always sophisticatedly endured it lightly-dressed—but anyway.

"Eh? What? What did you say?"

"I asked you if you've become ready to die. You've lived quite a long life, so have you become ready to die?"

Just like me.

Saying that, the little girl gave a terrifying smile—it felt like a long time since I'd seen that smile.

"Ah… Suicide from having gotten bored with living, right? That's what makes up ninety percent of vampires' deaths? Right, there was something like that, huh."

"It's not a matter of there *was* something like that. The reason I myself came to this country was to die, after all. That's why I descended upon this town. So, my master, if you are thinking that you want to die now, I won't think it strange at all."

"Oh, stop it. I'm only twenty-three years old, you know?"

"But haven't you taken to viewing the past quite fondly, as of late? Do you not think that it would have been better to die five years ago? For example, at this shrine. For example, on that athletic field. For example, inside that abandoned building. Do you not think you would have been happy if you'd died then? Ka ka."

She seemed like she was having fun.

Though it wasn't as bad as Oikura, her personality was still awful.

Although, it's not like I didn't understand what she was getting at—she was the legendary vampire that had chosen to die in the country where she'd met her first minion, Shishirui Seishirou, and she was the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire. And though I could hardly be considered of the same status as her, it was simply the common sense of immortal oddities that a long life did not necessarily mean a happy one.

Even the mermaid Suou-san or the golem Kizashima-senpai had been allowed to live due to oddities, while they would otherwise be dead. Even in the Rumors Squad, there were some truly special types like Kuwagata Hitata-san. Although I was the same… But in my case, it had been the opposite, because a vampire that had been about

to die had been made to live by me, a human.

"My high school days were so fun and happy, and that was the peak of my life, so it would've been better if I died then. What, do you really think I think that? …Stop it. There were plenty of times where I had fun, and there were tons of happy times, but overall my school life was just that of a moody teenager who'd almost dropped out."

During that "*kamaitachi*" case way back when, Kizashima-senpai had said something along those lines—and in my own case, because I'd entered a private school with a standard score that didn't fit my stature, it had been extremely tough.

I couldn't just simply say that those times had been good. If I had to, I'd say so bitterly.

And my relationship with my family had been the worst.

Thinking about how it was back then, it's almost unbelievable how well I got along with my sisters now—while I didn't want to overly glorify my past, I also didn't want to overly disparage it, but looking at it comprehensively, I definitely didn't think that the me from back then was happier than me now.

"Ka ka. Is that so? Right now, you are extremely blessed, after all. Being pampered at your workplace, and being filled with high spirits. Even though the you from back then, despite being immortal, looked dead on the inside, I am certain that if he looked at you know, he'd be filled with pride."

"I wonder about that. I can't help but think that he'd want to beat me up instead… Because right now, I'm just waving around a sense of elitism that the me from back then despised. I'm a career man with a good salary. And even though a lot happened, my college days were pretty fun, too. My area of activities got wider. Though I used to ride around on a bike, I learned to drive a car, and even boarded a plane and went on vacation. I read and understood books that I didn't understand in high school, and I even enjoyed movies that once made zero sense to me. If the me from back then, who had nearly dropped out and strayed from the right path, saw me now, he'd certainly find me utterly intolerable."

"Can you become happy if you're betraying your past self? Are you going to feel guilty about your success?"

"That's not what I'm trying to say."

Or was it?

Maybe I was just afraid of changing.

No, I couldn't say it was just that.

It was certainly true that I'd read and understood a book that I didn't understand in high school. And it was true that my tastes had changed as I grew older—but on the other hand, it was also true that I'd stopped being able to understand a book that I'd once loved so

much.

Even though I had so much fun with it, it had stopped being fun.

Even though I'd been so deeply moved by it, even though the book had been almost life-changing, it just felt shallow when I reread it now—like it had gone past the limits of mediocrity—and that disappointment brought upon a sense of guilt that made me want to shrivel up and die.

Though it's an exaggeration, it was a sense of guilt equivalent to the guilt of killing a single person.

"Ka ka. So are you feeling depressed because you killed off your past self? But having said that, it isn't as if you can just live your life reading and rereading a single book. It's quite possible that your feelings are the same as how, when you became a vampire in that spring break, you immediately wanted to go back to being human—and the same as how, when I was asked to become a god, I thought that I wanted to stay as a vampire."

"……"

"Or possibly—how I let go of the chance to go back to being the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, and instead chose to live with you in your shadow."

Shinobu then turned her entire body and faced the *torii*.

"But still, if my master wishes it, then I will be his most humble servant. It would not be hard to return you to your past state."

"Eh? Return me…"

"It had not been this well-kept back then, but we've done something of the sort at this shrine before, have we not? We used that *torii* as a gate, and we rewound time."

Ah—that's right, we did.

Although at the time, Shinobu had just casually taken me along into a time slip… And that had brought on some unthinkable results, but still, in the exact same way she'd done then, Shinobu said, "Let's do it!"

"Though I made a mistake before, don't worry! I'll get it right this time. It'll be fine if we go to a past that doesn't have you in it, right? With that, you'll be able to safely go through high school for the second time. If you're regretting the mistakes you made, why not just redo them? If you think that you right now are just one big mistake, you can just choose something different the second time around, whether it's going to college or finding a job. Even so, you'll keep on living—because you're a vampire."

Don't get lost on the streets, but lose yourself to the dark.

That's what Shinobu said—and it sounded like she was making a joke, but more than half of it was probably serious. She was the kind

of girl to suddenly suggest such imprudent motions—and it was those that were the temptations of the dark.

And I'd fallen for them so many times in high school.

I'd fallen for them so readily, so casually.

Nonetheless, Shinobu and I were in the same boat—if I could sense that Shinobu hadn't really changed that much in that respect, then that meant that I hadn't really changed that much either. And if that was true, then perhaps that was actually something to celebrate.

The me from the past that was still inside me—he wasn't dead yet.

"I don't have any desire to go back to the past, Shinobu. The me from right now and the me from the past are one and the same—they're both me. If there's someone that's going to be a high schooler for eternity, I'll leave that to Ougi-chan."

I see.

I'd certainly been flooded with nostalgia after returning to my hometown for the first time in four years. I'd met Kanbaru and Oikura, I'd talked with my sisters, and I'd experienced Hanekawa, so I must have become nervous and even sentimental—and I might have even fought with Hitagi because it was such a sensitive time for me. But this was just me acting like "the past was great" and playing at feeling good about it. I was pretty nasty for pretending something that ultimately hurt me.

I'd arbitrarily started to feel that I'd "left it behind", but it wasn't like everybody got to where they were now by making light of the past—Kanbaru got to where she was now through the match with her rival, and Oikura got to where she was now by taking in her past. It's because of the past that we have a present. It was even possible that Hanekawa, who'd erased her past, was the one thinking of the past the most.

Even as I felt apologetic towards my past self, I was confirming the position of my present self—but even the difference of eighteen years old and twenty-three years old would probably seem like nothing when I looked back as a thirty-year-old.

"I definitely can't say that growing up is going to be boring. Even Gaen-san and Oshino are all grown up, aren't they? Well, they might be exceptions, but fundamentally, growing up is something fun. And that seems true, looking at the people from the Rumors Squad, and looking at the entire Naoetsu Police Department. And even now, it's fun. There's still a lot of things I don't like now, just as there were in the past. But I can handle it. That's all I need to do."

I stopped looking at the gate… Er, the *torii*. And faced back towards the main shrine.

I couldn't see the god. But that was fine.

Not being able to see her was normal… It shouldn't be anything otherwise. Just like it was to Chief Kouga… Oddities were something that you normally couldn't see.

And, while you couldn't see them, they weren't something that didn't exist.

Even though you couldn't see them, you had to believe that they were there.

"Or maybe, it's like this. I hadn't lost my way in the slightest. I was just pretending to hesitate to feel better about myself, but I'd already decided what I was going to do—because standing at a crossroad doesn't mean I've lost my way. That's why I can't see Hachikuji. There's no way she wouldn't show her face if I was seriously troubled over something."

"Ka ka. If that's how you choose to think, then so be it. …But for the record, I wasn't sure if I was going to tell you, but if it's that lost girl, not even I can see her."

"Eh? Really?"

You should've said that earlier.

Or rather…. Isn't that a little strange? Regardless of whether or not I could see her… Even if she was linked to me, Shinobu was an oddity that ate oddities, so being unable to see one was…

"Indeed. Perhaps she has just stepped out for a bit? Even back then, she had been a god that was frequently absent, that girl."

"……"

To be absent from the shrine, even when it wasn't Kannazuki, the month with no gods… Well, it wasn't impossible.

In that case, give back the offering I made earlier.

Give back my five yen.

"…Then, I guess I'll just have to visit again. So I will. Without waiting so long to do so, next time."

"Will you be coming when you're troubled over something?"

"Nah. I'll come during a better time. I've decided just now. I'll hold my wedding with Hitagi here. Before this god."

Though I couldn't tell if she really was here at the main shrine or not, I decided to do my two bows, two claps, and then a third bow anyway.

Thinking about it, the start of my relationship with Hitagi had been presided over by Hachikuji as well—in that case, didn't that make this place a shrine of matchmaking?

"There's no way she wouldn't show her face during my big moment."

And when she does, I'll embrace that stroll-loving god from the heart.

I'll show her that adults can have fun, too.

"…Though you're saying something rather dashing and it's all very thrilling, from what I could see from your shadow, aren't you and that girl currently in the middle of a breakup?"

"Didn't I tell you? I've already decided what paths I'm going to take—I've decided. So, my humble servant, in regards to that, I'd very much like it if you could help me by any means necessary."

"Huh? For work?"

"Nope. It's one hundred percent for fun."

"If it's work, I only plan on helping in moderation."

Shinobu smiled.

Not a terrifying smile—but a cute one.

"But if it's for fun, then I'll help you out with all that I have."

005

On the final day of my training period, I made a special request to Chief Kouga to make some time for just the two of us to speak. When I gave her the bundle of documents I'd spent all night putting together, Chief Kouga skimmed through it before asking, "This doesn't seem like a letter of resignation, so what is it? What's going on?" with a puzzled expression.

"This is a housing map for this town. That is, for oddities—or rather, for the 'bad things' that come before oddities. I've written up a list detailing where they all are."

To be honest, what I really wanted to submit was a report detailing the resolution of all of them, having them be dispersed in the wind, but because it was me, I could unfortunately only accomplish about half of my intended schedule—it still made for a good parting gift for the Rumors Squad, but I couldn't say I was satisfied with it.

I was pretty lacking in originality.

What I did after descending from the Kitashirahebi Shrine was fieldwork that was basically the same as the actions of the specialist, Oshino Meme, who had gone around gathering oddity stores during his stay in this town.

If there was any difference, it would be that I did a fair amount of cheating by utilizing the appetite of the ruler of oddities, so to speak.

Even so, I hadn't been able to finish in time.

And because I hadn't finished, I couldn't even determine which ones were harmful and which were harmless, only having Shinobu eat the ones that were definitively dangerous, so I had no choice but to rely on my fellow Rumors Squad senpai to handle the rest.

Nevertheless, this list should be useful in demonstrating my spirit—if anything, I'd be okay if just my feelings reached Chief Kouga.

"Your feelings are great and all, but I can't take this without knowing what it's for. You didn't do it for work, right? Is this supposed to be a farewell gift, saying you'll never be returning to the Rumors Squad?"

"Well, it is partly as thanks for taking care of me over these past four months, but it's not a parting gift—if anything, it's a bribe."

"A bribe? Oi, oi, do you really think your chief is that underhanded?"

"I apologize for my choice of words. Let me change that to 'gratuity'. The thing is, I'd like for you to write me a letter of recommendation."

“I already said I would, didn’t I? You didn’t have to go out of your way to do your own research project. Your aspirations lie beyond the Naoetsu Police Department and the Rumors Squad, right? Okay, okay. It’s fine, as long as you’re not quitting being a member of the police, I can help you out. I’ll make sure you’re rated highly, whether you’re going for the capital or any other region.”

“However, I’m not going for either of those.”

That was why I was showing every courtesy in making my request.

Though I was aware of how it sounded, I wanted a letter of recommendation that rated me as highly as possible.

“I’d like to continue my training like now—just, overseas.”

“…Overseas police training for National Police Agency initiates?”

As expected, her mind was quick. Chief Kouga blinked in amazement.

That’s right. Overseas training.

For some reason, I’d been convinced that, if I wanted to rush over to where Hitagi was, I’d have to quit my job to do so—I’d assumed that, as long as I was a government employee, I’d be unable to leave the country.

But I realized in the middle of my conversation with Oikura.

This wasn’t about “TSUBASA HANEKAWA”, and it wasn’t like the National Police Agency was operating in countries with isolation policies, but in this era of globalism, there were systems in place if you looked closely—there were tons of police officers that cooperated with the International Criminal Police Organization and were dispatched overseas. But of course, this wasn’t an easy matter. It involved taking on difficult work like guarding embassies and such. In a sense, it was operating overseas as a representative of your country, which meant you needed to be qualified to do so.

For example… Well, for a younger person, about the level of an Assistant Inspector.

Like this, it almost makes me feel stupid. I’d been grumbling about how easy it would be to chase after Hitagi if I’d had a different job, but the truth was that from college, or perhaps even from high school, I’d steadily proceeded down the shortest path to following in her footsteps, as if I’d known in advance.

Why did I become a police officer?

When Suou-san had asked this, I’d responded, “because my parents were police officers”, but now I can respond like this —“because I wanted to stay together with my girlfriend that I was with since high school”.

It was mixing work and leisure, but that was fine.

Because, before I was a public servant, I was me.[12]

It was my humble servant that had told me that.

…I was probably repeating myself by now, but there were a lot of obstacles in my way. As a career, I couldn't go around completely unrestricted. Like being a single tree in a forest, there were probably a flood of applicants that were interested. Not to mention, the best of the best. The elite even among the elite. That's why Chief Kouga's support was essential, but even that probably wasn't enough—that's why I continued further.

"Someday, I'll return. And when that happens, I can be the chief of the Rumors Squad, or the chief of the Naoetsu Police Department, or whatever you want. And, of course, I'd like to make use of what I learned here even overseas."

"…In other words, you want me to bring this up to Gaen-senpai, too?"

"I doubt that she *doesn't* want to set up a base overseas, when she's trying to spread roots across all the public institutions in Japan, right? Though the FBI or MI5 might be too much, she probably doesn't want to keep relying on unaffiliated cooperators like Dramaturgy or Episode."

"Well, that's true… Hmm."

Chief Kouga once again flipped through the maps I handed her. Though she'd skimmed them quickly before, she was carefully perusing them now—as a founding member of the Rumors Squad, it was possible she was measuring my capabilities.

In that case, I'd done most of it pretty roughly… I couldn't say I was proud of my paperwork skills.

"What about your foreign language skills? And not your grades on an exam—do you have the confidence to actually communicate with locals in the area? You have to be able to speak the language of the land you're in."

Her tone of voice changed from that of a superior to that of an interviewer.

At the very least, it meant that she was taking it into consideration—although it made me more desperate.

Though I'd boasted to Shinobu about how I had no intention of returning to being a high schooler, it seemed I would have to return to the times when I'd bluffed my way through everything, just for this moment.

"I can't say I excel at foreign languages, when I struggle with even Japanese. My communication abilities are poor. My social disposition is also poor. I have a bit of an ungrateful personality. But I will be accompanied by an interpreter, so I'll be able to exchange words with overseas oddities."

“An interpreter—I see. Shinobu-chan, huh?” said Chief Kouga without taking her eyes off the paper. “An interpreter for the language of oddities. That’s what we valued most highly from you, after all—a delicate job that would be difficult for someone like Officer Saisaki.”

“Then?”

“Hold on, hold on. Don’t rush me. This is still under consideration—Assistant Inspector Araragi, your proposal is convenient for me and Gaen-san. Or rather, it’s ideal. But that’s only if everything goes well, and there’s also the case of if everything doesn’t go well to consider. This isn’t a problem with your abilities, but a problem of organizational structure—from an adult’s point of view, there’s a high probability that you’ll be crushed by the strict work environment overseas, be discouraged, and quit being a police officer. I don’t have the slightest idea why you’re aiming to work overseas, but you might even end up breaking up with your girlfriend.”

It sounded like she had a pretty good idea, though?

Also, I felt like her statement was going a bit too far.

“It’s fine if you regret not doing something, over regretting doing something, you know?”

“I’m doing this so I won’t regret it. The reason I don’t feel fulfilled, the reason I feel so unsatisfied, even though I’m so blessed… The reason I feel guilty towards my past self is not because I’ve succeeded or that I’ve become a part of the winners. It’s because I’m not living my life to the fullest. Even though I’m doing my best, I’m not actually doing my best. Even though I’ve grown, I’m not trying to grow further.”

“Did you forget what I said? It’s fine even if you don’t pursue your ideals. You aren’t obligated to make full use of your abilities—anybody would prefer living comfortably in a place that was prepared for them.”

“But, it’s fine even if I don’t live comfortably, isn’t it? It’s fine to live desperately. To go beyond my abilities and work myself to the limit.”

“Of course.”

As long as it’s within the range of the Labor Standards Act—said Chief Kouga, finishing her reread of the list.

“Okay, okay. Then, let’s go with that.”

“Eh? Go with what?”

“I’ll write you your letter of recommendation. I’ll put a gold star for your rating, and let Gaen-san know as well—but I don’t know what will happen after that. But whatever happens, I’ll have you return to the Rumors Squad in the end. And I won’t let you quit, even if you ask me to. That’s what we’re going with.”

There was suddenly quite a lot that we were “going with” that

it was hard to process all at once. Sorry? “Okay, okay” actually meant “okay, okay”? A definite answer? Even though I had so many more logical arguments I prepared… Although they were more illogical arguments… But all my demands were met in full?

“This is some good work. I have some minor complaints, but I can really do something about them on my own. Seko-chan might even be moved to tears by this… The fact that you got Shinobu-chan to cooperate with you on this needs no further explanation. I can feel your guts. It’s easy to see that you’ve helped out with Oshino-kun’s work in the past.”

It did make me happy to be directly praised like this, but I couldn’t help but feel restless from it… As someone who’d even faced off against a con man, I couldn’t help but be suspicious of tricks or feints. Was she going to impose certain conditions for this—wasn’t there going to be some difficult test or intense crash course?

“If you want to bargain like that, do it with Gaen-senpai. I’m just middle management that follows her instructions, in the end. I know nothing about specialist stuff and oddities. I can’t do anything about tests or crash courses. I can only evaluate you based on the four months I’ve spent with you, as well as this presentation just now. I’ve told you plenty of times, haven’t I? I can’t see oddities,”

said Chief Kouga.

“But I do have an eye for people.”

And now for the epilogue; or rather, the punch line for this case.

After thinking long and hard about how I would proceed forward without betraying myself, I'd finally managed to take my first step on the long path that stretched out ahead of me, but I was less trembling with excitement and more utterly exhausted. I'd headed straight home in order to make up for the lack of sleep from the previous day, but what greeted me at the entrance hall was something that made me the most fed up in days—it seemed Tsukihi had returned from Tokyo, as a pair of sneakers that were neither mine nor Karen's had been left at the entrance.

I'd only noticed because I'd been faithfully checking the shoes at the entrance ever since Tsukihi's and Hanekawa's home visit before… But I would've preferred to not notice.

Although she did say that she'd drop by once more before going back overseas… But why did it have to be tonight? Karen was on a night shift today, so I'd been planning on getting some peace and quiet. It was as if both Oikura and Tsukihi had taken careful aim to have the worst timing possible… But oh well, at least this was a chance to pry into my sister's overseas lifestyle. I doubted that her utterly nonsensical private life would serve as a good reference for me, but I could at least use it as an example of what not to do. Thinking about how Senjougahara Hitagi was awake and moving around due to the time difference in that foreign country, I decided to interrogate my tiny sister—but then.

When I entered the living room, pumping myself up to stay awake for a little while longer, who would be sitting cross-legged on the sofa but the one that should be awake and moving around in a foreign country, Senjougahara Hitagi.

"Yo."

"This isn't a time to say 'yo!'"

I'd fallen to my knees, but I'd barely managed to keep myself from collapsing entirely, and crawled my way towards the sofa.

"How did you even get in?"

"You'd be better off changing where you hid the spare key."

"You do know you broke into a house of police officers?"

"I'm sorry I apologize I was foolish."

She looked right into my eyes and apologized.

Although, she was wearing colored sunglasses that made it obvious she'd just returned from some area with bright sunlight, and her voice had been completely monotone, but it seemed she was not

actually apologizing for her audacious trespassing.

Don't tell me… Did she return to Japan to apologize…?

Seeing the sturdy suitcase that had been set aside, it seemed she hadn't even gone back to her parent's home, and come straight here instead—although she'd probably never say as much herself, considering how obstinate she was.

"Er… It's my bad, too. It was just a lot of stress that piled up. I'm sorry."

It was a strange feeling that I could only describe as having been beaten to the punch, or having been one-upped, but I felt a huge sense of relief, and I sat down on the sofa facing Hitagi.

Because even though I'd come up with various schemes using brains that I didn't have, I hadn't discussed any of them with Hitagi at all.

I'd wanted to act based on my own judgment until I reached my goal. I'd wanted to demonstrate my sincerity, but perhaps I was just being stubborn about it, too.

Well, I had thought about giving her a call starting tomorrow, but now that I met her face-to-face like this, I couldn't keep quiet for even a second longer. I wanted to share the career choices I'd thought of with Hitagi.

"Hitagi. There's something I want you to hear first, is that okay?"

"Whatever you want. As long as it won't turn into our fourth breakup. And, as long as you hear what I have to say first, Koyomi."

"Mm…"

She was really taking the wind out of my sails here, but oh well. If I got too passionate and started prattling on without thinking, she might just get mad at me for just moving the conversation along on my own. It's better to think about what I want to say in advance.

"As a condition for my promotion onto an official team, I sent in a proposal to establish a Japanese branch to the CEO, and it somehow turned into reality. It's not decided for sure, but if I can get cleared on the budget, I'll be able to return to this town this spring, together with my boss and my team. So I'll be able to live together with you, Koyomi, from now on."

"……"

She'd moved the conversation along on her own.

Eh? Ehh? Ehhh?

You put a condition on your promotion? And not only that, you got your boss and your whole team involved? Just to come back to Japan? Just because you didn't want to be apart from me any more?

"Establishing a branch in Japan had already been talked about

before. I just pushed it along a bit… This means I'm really becoming straight-up rivals with my father, but daughters have to surpass their fathers someday, anyway."

I thought the line had to do with sons, but I guess there was nothing saying that daughters couldn't surpass their fathers, either… But anyway, what the heck? We'd had the exact same thought process. No, well, I had tried to move through my system, with conditions placed on my advancement, while Hitagi had changed her system entirely, and advanced by placing conditions, so I could only say that she'd one-upped me in that respect…

But, in that case… What were we going to do?

What was with this "Gift of the Magi" situation that spanned nations?

If I were to put it like Ougi-chan, these were truly gifts of fools.

"What's wrong? If you're not going to be happy for me, I'm going to burst into tears."

"I'm happy. I've never been happier… I'm even trying to restrain myself from getting up and rejoicing. But, Hitagi-san. Can you prepare yourself and listen to what I have to say?"

If it was like this, I almost wanted the symbol of peace once known as Hanekawa Tsubasa to erase the borders of countries all over the world already, but we couldn't just lazily wait for that day to come. In the first place, if that ever became reality, Hitagi would have to constantly watch over the state of international finance, and in the worst case, I might have to be the one to regulate it.

So, before that, let's talk it out.

"What is it? Preparing myself… You're making me all tense. Don't tell me we're actually going to break up for the fourth time? If so, I'm going to burst into tears."

"That's not it! Why do you want to cry so much? There's no way that's it. In the first place…"

In the first place, before we could break up for a fourth time, we'd need to reconcile our third breakup, didn't we? Right, before anything, we'd need to talk about that—I didn't want to hear any more about how common it was to get back together and then split apart again. And I didn't want to put off getting back together for a minute more.

I extended my arm and gently pulled off her sunglasses. I had thought that the fact that she was still wearing them indoors meant that she'd pompously wanted me to take them off for her, but this was completely off the mark—Hitagi had just been hiding her eyes, because they were completely red, as if she'd been crying for days on end.

She'd already burst into tears, hadn't she? She really was a bit

of a crybaby.

Then, if I said this, she'd probably cry even more… But I was at a point where I'd have to start studying foreign languages from now on. Whatever happened next, I'd figure it out as I got to it, but for now, I'd love it if my girlfriend, who had spent quite some time in the country, could check my pronunciation for me.

"*I love you.*"

Her red eyes turned wide, and smiling while crying, bashfully responded with, "Koyomi, *tore*."

The words of our union[13] were not words that had caught on, but words from our memories alone.

Afterword

After I started writing a series, the question I've gotten the most tired of being asked and having to answer would be the oft-asked, "How far in advance did you think of these things?" If I answer "I didn't particularly think of anything in advance", then it would just sound hostile and disappoint the asker, but if I answer "Everything was calculated well in advance and everything is going according to plan", that also sounded rather unpleasant. Saying, "Things were thought of in advance to some degree, but a lot of it was set up to reasonably fit the situation and trends at the time, and I managed to put it together in some way or another, despite adding new things or going back to old things on the fly" would be the most accurate answer, and you might wonder, what part of this ambiguous answer could possibly be accurate? But really, that's about it. In short, it's a problem that involves "to some degree" or "to some extent", so if you ask whether something is 1 or 0 with no in-between—well, no matter how much an author plans things out, I highly doubt that there's anyone that can make things go perfectly as planned over a course of a series. When you actually start writing, it may end up turning out completely different from what you imagined in your head, and it's something you won't know until you try, so it's not necessarily the right thing to do to insist on sticking to the plan, either. It is important to carry out your original intention, of course, but "if you do it once and it's bad, you should do it again" is also a possibility. What's important is not to "think of things in advance", but to "keep thinking of things until the very end", is ultimately what I've repeatedly ended up believing and not believing.

Anyway, taking this from a different perspective, then what about the Monogatari Series? When the two volumes of "Bakemonogatari" were published in 2006, I can't definitively speak for whether or not I had any ideas of the contents of the book you're reading, since I can't remember very clearly, but it's likely that I hadn't written a single word of this book. Far from "Bakemonogatari", even when I wrote the previous work, "Nademonogatari", I believe I hadn't written a single word of this book. Well, I'm sure there was at least a single word. But if you take that to mean that I hadn't thought of anything about it at all, then I don't think that's quite right, either. I had probably thought about it, thought about it, thought about it, and thought about it some more, and with over ten years passing, I can surmise that some of what I thought about stayed alive in some form or another in this book. I can believe that the things I thought about didn't go to waste. For example, even if there was an idea I didn't use,

that train of thought had still taken form, which could then have acted as another path for me. And so, you have this book that was one hundred percent written as a hobby, the once-again completed Monogatari Series, the twenty-second volume detailing Araragi Koyomi at twenty-three years of age, the final book of the Off Season, “Musubimonogatari”.

I am grateful to VOFAN-san for the illustration of Senjougahara Hitagi in a white kimono on the cover. Thank you very much. She is also 23 years old now. As a bit of an overlap with the cover of “Bakemonogatari”, she’s carrying a stapler in her hand. Ten years ago, I would never have predicted that Senjougahara-san would grace the cover of a book like this. Now then, what shall I think of next?

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

If you've reached this point while under the impression that you've just finished reading the novel, "Musubimonogatari", by Nisio Isin, then you'd be wrong. At worst, this is just some well-written fanfiction. Or perhaps even poorly-written, depending on your tastes. Anyway, the point I'm trying to get at is that a translated work is never simply just "translated"—the work inevitably has to be interpreted and transformed by the translator, and the output that is produced will inevitably contain the translator's presumptions and biases, whether they're biases regarding the work itself, biases regarding the English language, or something else entirely. It's almost like a warped version of the Ship of Theseus. Well, in short, just take my translation (and by extension, all translations) with a grain of salt. I just felt like writing a smart-sounding paragraph to sound clever and philosophical like Nisio did above.

Overall, I took a much more cavalier (that is, lazy) approach to this novel, focusing more on readability in English than preserving every minute detail of the text as presented in Japanese. Hopefully I succeeded, and the text does flow well enough for an amateur translation. I figure it's worth noting that in a Japanese-to-English translation, you'd think the hard part would be being fluent in Japanese, but honestly I felt like this was a bigger challenge to my knowledge of the English language more than anything. I also went with an approach of not using translator's notes, since I always felt like they interrupted reading (especially with something like footnotes, which *do not work* on web pages because of how far you have to scroll down the page).[14] Fortunately for this novel, there wasn't really a whole lot worth explaining, aside from the few puns that I just slipped in in-line Japanese readings for. Although, if a certain tongue-tied snail had appeared, that would have been its own struggle entirely.

There are so many more things about the translation that I could address, but it's probably better to stop myself now. In a way, I both pity and envy official translators who don't necessarily get a space like this to ramble on about their own opinions. Ideally, a translation should be able to stand on its own without its translator hovering around it like a helicopter parent, but on the other hand, it can be useful to have a space where I can take responsibility for my own influences that I've introduced into this translation. Regardless, on behalf of the original author, thanks for reading "Musubimonogatari", and please continue to support the Monogatari Series in the future.

Polaris

Updated September 28, 2024

Notes

[←1]
駿河問い *surugadoi* “Japanese bondage torture”. Compare 駿河 Suruga.

[←2]

Weasels are イタチ *itachi* in Japanese.

[←3]

雑木林 *zoukibayashi* “thicket”, 臓器林 *zouki bayashi* “forest of organs”.

[←4]

禁呪 *kinju* “forbidden spell”, compared to 金 *kin* “gold” and 樹 *ju* “tree”.

[←5]

鏡 *kagami* “mirror”, 鑑 *kagami* “exemplar”.

[←6]

集大成 *shuutaisei* “culmination”, 終大成 *shuu taisei* “final accomplishment”.

[←7]

Tsukihi says ご両親ども *goryoushin-domo*, where ども *domo* can be derogatory. Koyomi corrects her with どの *dono*, which is more respectful.

[←8]

まんまと *manmato* “successfully”, 猫まんま *neko manma* “cat food”.

[←9]

对等 *taitou* “equivalent”, 对策 *taisaku* “countermeasure”.

[←10]

叶わない *kanawanai* “to not come true”, 敵わない *kanawanai* “to be unbearable”.

[←11]

乱用 *ran'you* “abuse”, 乱心 *ranshin* “derangement”.

[←12]

公僕 *kouboku* “public servant”, 僕 *boku* “me”.

[←13]

結び *musubi “union”*.

[←14]

This afterword was written when the translation was posted on web pages. It's not very relevant in EPUB format.